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Her stepfather's House

JUNE WETHERELL

Her mother had married a mysterious stranger– would he offer Gail love . . . or a nightmare of evil?

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DEATH BY FIRE

"It's not a real fire yet," Gail said, trying to reassure her mother. "It may not spread much farther." But a fire was a fire, and with no telephone . . .

In the few minutes they had been on the third floor, the fire had spread out of the office and across the downstairs hall, and there was fire on the stairs as well.

"We can't get through, Gail. We can't!"

"The back stairs!" Gail said.

They ran to the back stairs and felt their way down through the darkness, clinging to the banister. Within a minute or two, they reached the door at the bottom, leading into the kitchen.

"It's locked!" Gail cried.

They were trapped—trapped in a burning building, and there was no way out.

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JUNE WETHERELL

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HER STEPFATHER'S HOUSE

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Chapter 1

The gloomy monster of a house was not at all what Gail had expected.

The gate to the high fence that surrounded the property was locked. Gail turned off the motor and sat looking up at the house before she honked for admittance.

In not much more than an hour's drive from New York City she had ridden into a different world.

The house dominated a hill on the edge of the little village of Bellingburg. It was several stories high with a couple of domes on top that from the gate looked like round rabbit ears against the twilight autumn sky. There were lights in two win-

dows just below the domes, but the shades were pulled almost to the bottom. It was as if those windows were half closed, suspicious eyes. The big broad light on the ground floor was wide as a jack-o-lantern's leering grin.

On the seat beside her Gail's dog whimpered excitedly and sniffed at the window.

"Just a minute, Nita," Gail said. "We're almost there. At least I think we're almost there."

She looked down at the notes she had made on how to find the house. Yes, she was sure she had turned off the highway at the right spot.

The highway had been like an extension of New York City, a monotonous cement pattern, the gas stations, the eating spots, even the trees repeating themselves, until she found the sign for Bellingburg. She had followed the unprepossessing narrow road that passed through Bellingburg's one stoplight and wound up into the hills to this large lonely house beyond the gate in the high wall.

She had to remind herself that this was her mother's house, that Mother was inside there somewhere, with her new husband, that everything would be all right. Why should she feel apprehensive?

"You're a sissy," Bruce had told her once. "It takes an act of congress to get you to take a dare."

But she was not a sissy! She was no different from anyone else when it came to first times: first

ride on a horse, first time on water skis, first date with a strange dance partner. She did dare, and she did overcome, but her brief period of hesitation she never had been able to hide. "You've got honest eyes," Bruce had told her. "Which is why you're no good at poker."

Bruce! Damn Bruce! That was probably why she had lost him. By letting him know how much she loved him. But had it been love, or just fascination with a fellow who blew hot and cold and made his own rules? When he had wanted a date, he had turned up. But often he had broken dates, and often, too, he had not turned up for long periods of time.

She remembered the last time she saw him. He popped into the apartment late in the evening, unannounced. Nonchalantly helping himself to a drink, sprawling on her couch.

She must have been frowning as she stood watching him, because he looked up at her and said, "Only a nightcap, chick."

She had not heard from him in at least two weeks; she had stayed home waiting for his call. And here he was, taking her for granted.

Gail had thought that Bruce's nonchalant, informal, spur-of-the-moment way of life was what made him exciting, but then, abruptly, as if a clock had struck midnight and the coach had turned back into a pumpkin, she saw Bruce Campbell for what he was: selfish.

"It's not just a nightcap," she told him gravely, "it's a farewell toast. Drink up—and go!"

She was still standing, watching. She was glad of her so-called honest eyes because she could see that Bruce knew she meant it.

He drank up in one big swallow, got to his feet.

"Thanks for the drink." His eyes were cold. He walked across the room, opened the door, banged it behind him.

She cried, of course, but she felt purged, cleansed.

But how lonely she had been! How glad when her mother called.

On the telephone her mother had been bubbly about her new home. What had she called it? "A marvelous big country house. The room, darling, oh the marvelous room, after that stuffy little apartment!"

Until a few months ago Gail and her widowed mother had shared the apartment in New York City. Gail, who had studied art, was working in a gallery, and spent little time in the apartment. Her mother had been lonely there, and restless. Gail had not guessed just how lonely, how restless. Carolyn Fisher had always been unpredictable, full of whims, but Gail never had expected to come home and find a note saying her mother had eloped.

Gail had met this Wolff Sorenson, who was to

become her stepfather, only once, at one of Carolyn's cocktail parties. He had not impressed her one way or another; she recalled him vaguely as fat and polite, an importer of foreign foods who did a lot of traveling. The elopement had been followed by a trip to the Orient. There had been a string of uninformative postcards, and then the phone-call, this week.

"Darling," Mother had babbled, "Wolff's house is so close to New York City that we can see each other often, whenever we're home. Please come up for the long weekend, you do have Friday off, don't you? And we can have a good visit. Do bring darling Nita. I miss her, too."

It had sounded wonderful. A big homey house had been part of her dreams as well as her mother's. Gail's father had been in the Air Force and the Fishers never had had a permanent home.

She opened the car door and let Nita out, watched the black and white figure galloping across the road and then hesitating, puzzled, no doubt looking for a curb in good city dog fashion.

When Nita was safely back in the car, Gail started the engine and honked the horn. Mother had told her about the gate, which would be opened by an electronic device from inside the house.

In a moment she saw a face in one of the second floor windows. She rolled down the window and

stuck out her head, her tangled light hair tossed by the breeze. Surely she could be recognized! Still, it took a moment before the gate slowly swung open. She hurried to drive through, the way she always hurried through revolving doors and into elevators, in fear of getting trapped.

Inside there were two cars, both large as limousines. She parked beside them, and stepped out, feeling as small and somewhat overpowered as her little Volkswagen.

Somebody was home—two cars, the lights, the opening of the gate—but the place was deadly quiet as she carried her suitcase through the semi-darkness up the long flagstone path to the door.

She raised the knocker and a ripple of little bells and then loud ferocious barking destroyed the silence.

Mother hadn't mentioned another dog. Gail put her hand on Nita's collar as she waited.

"Champ!" The voice was a command. "Champ, heel! Hold!"

Wolff Sorenson opened the door.

He was as fat as Gail remembered, he actually had a double chin and the stomach of a pregnant woman. But he was not one of those soft, easy-going fat men, the jovial Santa Claus type. Despite his roundness he looked strong.

Beside him the big Doberman pinscher went into a low crouch, eyes hard, fixed on Nita. The hackles rose on Nita's back.

"Hello, Gail, my dear, welcome to the old homestead." But his eyes were on Nita. "I forgot," he said, "about the dog. I didn't realize she was coming."

"I'm sorry! I hope they'll get along."

"Don't worry. I can control Champ." His tone was proud. "That's his nickname, of course. His full name is Champion Charles Edward Witherington, AKC. What kind of a dog is that?"

Not for the world would Gail say mongrel. "She's a fox terrier bull terrier whippet."

"I see." He considered Nita for a moment. "Well, come in." He turned to the Doberman. "Upstairs, Champ!"

Muttering, stiff-legged, Champ obeyed.

Nita stuck close to Gail's heels as they walked inside.

Wolff reached for her suitcase. "I'll take this up," he said, "and call Carolyn. She's upstairs, changing. Late as usual. But then I'm sure that does not surprise you."

Gail returned his smile. "No, it doesn't."

She stood in the long drab hall, watching him climb the stairs, his heavy footsteps continued for at least two flights.

The hall was dark and unfurnished, like a hotel corridor, with rows of doors, a telephone in a niche on the wall. To the left there were old-fashioned sliding doors, slightly opened, slanting a path of lamplight across the floor.

A moment later Carolyn came floating down the big stairs.

Everyone said that Gail resembled her mother, but the resemblance was fleeting. Both had big blue eyes, fair hair. Carolyn's hair was sleeker, but otherwise she was a feathery forecast of an older, faded Gail. In a place as dimly lit as this, for Gail to look at her mother was like catching her reflection in a very bad mirror.

"Darling!" Carolyn mumbled, and put her arms around her daughter. There was the familiar too heavy perfume contrasting with her wispy kiss.

She pulled away and Nita jumped on her, tail a-wagging.

"And dear little Nita. Down, Nita, be good doggie, now." She turned and pushed the sliding doors open. "Come in, Gail, we must have a drink!"

The room—it must have been the old parlor—was as opulent as the hall had been bare. Chandeliers and wooden panelings and overstuffed puffy furniture. The atmosphere would have been that of the latest luxury of the nineteen twenties, except for its incongruous touches, obviously Carolyn's: souvenirs from her recent trip to the Orient —a fat brass Buddha, a miniature pagoda carved of dark wood, a gaudy Japanese screen with a flowering cherry tree that contrasted obliquely with an old gold framed sylvan scene with nymphs a-dancing.

Carolyn hurried to close the sliding doors behind them.

"Wolff has business to attend to," she explained. She smiled, rather nervously. Then she moved quickly across the room to a little cocktail wagon. "Daiquiri, dear? It's all fixed."

"Thanks." Gail felt as if it were years since she had outgrown her taste for daiquiris. But a daiquiri had been the first drink she ever had been allowed to have, and Mother prided herself on never forgetting. Gail did not mind too much. It was reminiscent of the old days when Dad was alive—officers' clubs, flirting with the second lieutenants, and all the rest.

"Now," Carolyn said, pouring herself a very stiff martini, "sit down and tell me all about yourself and what you've been up to."

Her mother was such an innocent, in so many ways. There she sat in a ruffled pink hostess gown, looking like a little kid. Gail felt, as she always did, rather large and shabby. She smoothed at her wrinkled slacks and wondered if her blouse were wrinkled, too. She really should have been given a chance to freshen up before the cocktail hour.

"Mother," she said, "you know about me. Same job. Same apartment. It's you who has to tell me all about you and what you've been up to."

"Oh." Carolyn took a sip of martini, then looked down at the glass, as if it could furnish her

an answer. Finally, without lifting her face, she said, "I fell in love, that's all, my dear."

The house that had been so quiet when they arrived now began to have noises. Several times the doorbell chimed, and there was much running up and down of stairs, and Champ barking.

"I'm so glad you could make it this weekend." Carolyn raised her voice above the house's din. "Because next week we're off again." She sighed. "I should be used to travel, but lately . . ."

"I miss traveling," Gail said. "I miss the old Air Force days."

"I know, dear. I miss those days, too."

"Sorry, Mother."

"It's not the same now." Carolyn hesitated, then went on. "These trips aren't like when your father was stationed abroad. And they're not like vacations, either. They're business trips, they're different. Wolff is out all day and lots of the evenings, buying and contracting and doing lord knows what and I'm . . . not always welcome."

The front door chimes set up their tinkling racket and Champ's voice boomed out.

Carolyn got up and went back to the bar and picked up a plate of hors d'oeuvres. "Here, Gail, have some. They're absolutely delicious. Wolff brings them home."

It was an arresting array. Pate de fois gras, English biscuits, stuffed anchovies, Danish herring in cream, lichi nuts.

Gail had an anchovy. Then she tossed one to Nita.

"Is that all right?"

"Of course, dear."

A moment later Gail asked, "Isn't this place a bit of a commute?"

"Well, not exactly. The warehouse, of course, is in New York City. He goes there occasionally. But his real office is here in the house."

Perhaps that would explain the noises.

"I see."

"I'm so glad you came. So very glad. Just your being here makes this a party!" Her voice was wistful. As if she were lonesome. As if something were wrong.

Suddenly there was a knock on the double doors.

Carolyn jumped to her feet.

"That must be Donald!" She sounded terribly pleased. "Donald Bishop," she explained. "He works for Wolff. He usually drops in for a drink about this time, before he leaves."

The young man who walked into the room was large, football-player size, self-assured, smiling.

Again Gail wished she had taken the time to clean up.

"This is my daughter Gail," Carolyn purred, "that I've told you so much about. Gail, this is Donald Bishop, Wolff's right-hand man. When we go away, he takes over. Donald, you fix your own

Scotch and water the way you want it, you know I never could get it right!"

"Okay," Donald said, and walked swiftly across to the bar cart. Gail noticed that he fixed himself a very weak drink. He came back and sat down on the chair nearest to her.

"I guessed who you were when you drove up," he said quietly, adding, "I was the one who buzzed you in."

"Thank you."

Carolyn again passed the hors d'oeuvre tray. Donald shook his head, and frowned down at Nita, who was sitting there, practically drooling.

"No more, Nita," Gail said. "You'll get fat."

"Female?" Donald asked.

"Ex-female," Gail told him.

"Good. I was thinking of Champ."

"I know."

"Champ is such a noisy dog," Carolyn said.

"He's supposed to be," Donald reminded her. "After all, he is a watch dog."

The house had grown extremely quiet. Whatever the business was that had been going on must be finished.

"So you're my . . ." Gail hesitated. What should she call this man her mother had married? ". . . my stepfather's assistant."

"Oh, Gail!" her mother exclaimed. "Don't use that dreadful word. Just call him . . . Wolff."

"Okay, if he doesn't mind."

"Oh, I'm sure he won't mind. Will he, Donald?"

"Oh, no." He was looking at Gail as if he were tired of talking about Wolff. "Well, what do you think of Bellingburg?"

She laughed. "I just drove through the town. I was so busy figuring out how to find this house that I scarcely looked at it. Except to notice that it was small."

"It's a lovely little town," Carolyn said, a bit too enthusiastically.

"The countryside is nice," Donald added.

Conversation wilted for awhile, until Gail said, "Your work must be interesting."

"My work?" He looked startled.

"With . . . Wolff."

Donald shrugged his big shoulders. "After awhile it's just like everything else. Merchandising. I used to be in clothing. I'll bet you have some glamorous job. Or do you have a job? Your mother said something about your being an artist."

"That's Mother's idea of toning it up. I'm an amateur artist, but I do have a job. At a gallery. Merchandising again."

They both laughed.

"Time for everybody to have a drink," Carolyn announced.

Gail held her glass away from her mother's outstretched hand.

"What is it, dear?"

"I think first I'd like to wash up. And see a little more of the house, so I can find my way around. It looked so enormous from outside."

"Of course! Of course! I'll take you on a grand tour."

"May I come along?" Donald asked.

"If you like. I think Wolff's already put your bag in your room, Gail. Anyhow, we'll go straight to the top and work down. All right?"

"Whatever you say."

In the hall Carolyn paused. "The dining room's over there." She pointed. "You'll see it later. It's Marylou's night off so we'll just have a buffet. And the kitchen's behind that. Its outside door is down the hall. And the other door, on this side, is to the library."

"Library?" Gail was both surprised and pleased. She liked to read in bed and had brought nothing with her.

"It's not really a library now," Carolyn said hastily. "It's . . . a storeroom, mostly. Oh, there are some books. But nothing interesting. They all belonged to . . . the first Mrs. Sorenson." Her expression was grim. "Come on!"

They moved up the stiars, Nita starting ahead and then turning to wait for them.

The doors were closed on the second floor and one door on the third. "Wolff must be changing," Carolyn said. "That's his room." Again she

pointed. "Mine is here, see?" She opened the door slightly to reveal the usual state of confusion that was Carolyn's natural habitat. Separate bedrooms? Odd, Gail was thinking.

"Over here, dear," her mother went on, "is yours."

It was across the hall, on the side of the house. The door was ajar. There was also another flight of stairs.

"Up there is the fourth floor." Mother pointed to the stairs. "It's really the attic. Although part of it has been converted to a bedroom. There were . . . children in the family. I'll have to take you up there by daylight, for the view. There's a fine view of the valley."

"You can even see Belling Falls," Donald added. "On a clear day."

"Beautiful falls, beautiful," Mother said. "Will you be long, dear? Shall we wait?"

"What? Oh, yes." Gail remembered she *had* asked about washing.

Her room was about the size of her apartment living room and it even looked like home. She could recognize her mother's touch—the fluffy tie-back white organdy curtains, the tufted bedspread, a bouquet of flowers on the bureau. And, a luxury, her own bathroom just beyond.

In a moment she had washed her face and hands and tied her hair back in a more respectable

pony tail. The blouse and slacks would have to do for now, she didn't want to keep them waiting out in the hall.

When she came out her mother said, "You look so prim with your hair that way. For goodness sake, Gail, why don't you have it done some time?"

Carolyn's hair was always sleek with perfumed spray.

Donald smiled at Gail. "I like it," he told her.

They walked down a flight and both Carolyn and Donald looked as if they were not going to stop.

Gail paused. "What's on this floor?" she asked.

Carolyn seemed to hesitate. "Well, over there, on that side, is the linen closet and storeroom. Summer furniture and . . . things."

The door was ajar on the other side.

"That's . . . Wolff's office." Carolyn started to move on.

Nita, who had kept close every step of the way, suddenly put her nose into the half open door and moved in.

Carolyn called her, "Nita! Nita, come here!"

"She loves to explore," Gail said. "I'll get her."

She followed the dog.

"Wolff doesn't like . . ." Carolyn was starting to say but Gail paid no attention. The room was dark. She fumbled on the wall beside the door and found the lightswitch.

It was an office. Just a plain ordinary office, not like a part of a house at all. Cabinets, two desks, swivel chairs, a calendar on the wall. Along one side was a cabinet, floor to ceiling. Samples of food, almost like a grocery store, smelling like a grocery store. And a freezer.

Where was Nita?

Then she spotted her. Over in a corner, behind a cabinet was a door, almost hidden. Nita had her nose at the bottom, sniffing.

"Nita, come here!"

Now Gail saw that Donald was beside her.

"Get that dog out of here," he said sharply.

"She's just a dog. Her middle name's food."

"Get her out!"

Surprised at his tone, Gail hurried over and took Nita by the collar, pulled her away, and across the room out into the hall.

Donald immediately switched off the light and slammed the door.

"Where is everybody?" Wolff called up from downstairs. He had not been in his room, after all!

"Coming!" Carolyn called back. "We're coming. We were just showing Gail the house."

Once released, Nita ran ahead of them down the stairs.

"Please put that dog outside," were Wolff's first words.

"But . . ."

"But what?"

"I was thinking about Champ."

Wolff smiled. "I'd rather not have the dogs around while we're dining. Don't worry. Females can take care of themselves."

Chapter 2

Wolff took over the party. It became his party. He refilled the glasses, he passed the hors d'oeuvres, explaining what each of them was to Gail, although she was not unacquainted with most of them.

No wonder he's fat, Gail thought, watching him eating his own merchandise. Every time he passed the platter he popped one of them into his own mouth and chewed it thoughtfully, but with obvious pleasure.

"Where is it you're going next week?" Gail asked him.

He looked surprised. "Didn't your mother tell you? Spain."

"Great!"

"Darling," Carolyn asked her husband, "will it be cold in Spain this time of year?"

"In southern Spain it's summer time, my dear. Of course, when we get to Madrid it can be chilly. Best to take one of your furs. Last fall I shivered in my boots. I keep forgetting where you've been and where you haven't been!"

"I think it's wonderful, all the traveling you get to do," Gail told him.

"Wonderful?" Wolff gulped at his drink. "I find it rather dull. I mean, when you get down to it, one city is pretty much like another, and practically everybody speaks English. And if you want to stay in a really comfortable hotel, which I naturally do, you'll find them quite Americanized. And between cities . . . well, you spend a lot of time in airplanes, not to mention airports, which I loathe. I much prefer to be here in my own house with my own bed and good old Champ. And," he added hastily, winking at Carolyn, "of course you, my dear."

Definitely a man with positive opinions, Gail decided, trying to think of him as her mother's husband. Her own father had been a positive person, too, head of the house in the strongest meaning of the phrase. Perhaps that was why her mother had gravitated toward another "strong" man. Mother was a clinger. But life with father

had been different. Father's positiveness was all Air Force—there were things you did and did not do. But at home, out of uniform, alone with the family, his rules had all been in favor of fun, offbeat games. And in foreign countries he had made it a point to learn something of the culture of the place, of the language, of the people, whenever there was time to do so. He never would have spun over the world seeking Hilton-type hotels and people who spoke English.

"I like to travel," Gail said to Donald. "Don't you?"

He nodded politely.

She sighed. "I've missed it lately."

"Lately?"

She wondered if her mother were listening from across the room. She said in a low voice, "We did a lot when my father was alive. He was in the Air Force."

"Oh, yes."

Carolyn looked up. She had heard. But she was forcing a small sad smile.

"I'm saving my money, Mother!"

Carolyn turned her pretty face up to her husband.

"Some time, Wolff, couldn't we take Gail along? She could keep me company while you're working and . . ."

Wolff had finished his drink and turned toward

the bar cart. "Perhaps," he said over his shoulder. "But Gail's interests, I'm sure, are different. She might prefer to travel independently."

"I think he's right." Donald being loyal to his boss.

Carolyn's tone was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Perhaps," was all she said, but again her face was nervous, almost frightened. Wolff Sorenson was the boss around here, for sure.

The phone rang out in the hall.

Wolff turned to Donald. "Would you get that, please?" He put it in the form of a question but it was a command and Donald hopped to his feet, put down his drink, and left the room.

He was back in a moment. It was for Wolff, and when Wolff left to answer, Carolyn excused herself to "see about dinner."

"Can I help?" Gail asked.

"No, thanks. Marylou has everything laid out. It's only a matter of uncovering and gas-lighting." She turned to Donald. "Can you stay?"

His head was tilted in the direction of the half open door. "I think . . . not," he said. "Thank you, all the same."

As soon as Carolyn had left the room Donald sat down closer to Gail. He was smiling, a bit more relaxed.

"Tell me where."

"Where?"

"Where you want to go, when you travel."

"Oh, Europe, first. I haven't been there since once when I was a kid and I didn't appreciate all the things I can now."

"Like?"

Gail thought a moment. Then, cocking her head to catch his reaction she said, "I just can't decide between the Louvre, the Prado, and the Vatican."

Donald laughed. Then pondered a moment for an answer.

"I guess I can't decide between . . . let's see . . . escargot, suckling pig, and . . . truffles."

Gail smiled back. "I'd like those, too. I do think of other things than art."

"Like I think of other things than food. Look, speaking of traveling, what about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"I'd like to drive you around and show you the local scenery. Beautiful Belling Valley, autumn leaves, and Belling Falls. And so on."

"Why, thank you! But won't you have to work? Or do you have Friday off, too?"

He almost frowned. "I'm . . . free to take you, if that's what you mean."

The buffet dinner was a fabulous one, a fascinating collection of Sorenson Imports, frozen or dehydrated or canned, needing only assemblage to produce a feast.

Swiss fondue, rich with cheese. Spanish arti-

choke hearts. Stuffed grape leaves from Greece. English pickled onions. Polish ham. And, at the end, Italian espresso, delicate cookies from Denmark, and assorted fruits in Jamaican rum.

It was all delicious and both Wolff and her mother were doing their best to be charming. But there was an undercurrent of emotion she could not quite fathom. She wished there were another guest; she wished Donald had been able to stay for dinner.

When they had finished and got up from the table Carolyn said, "Now we don't try to clean up. Just put some of the perishables away . . ."

"Nonsense, throw them out!" Wolff told her. "There's more where they came from. I'm going for a brandy."

Alone with her mother Gail hurried to ask, "Mother, is it all right now to feed Nita?"

"Of course, of course! There's plenty. You can call her to the back door."

Her hands loaded, Carolyn pushed open the swinging door with her shoulder and Gail followed.

It was an enormous old-fashioned kitchen, complete with pantry and breakfast nook.

Before she could assemble a plate of leftovers, Nita was scratching at the back door.

Gail took the food outside to the back porch. At first the dog was torn between an affectionate reunion and the plate. At last she started gobbling

and Gail looked about her. There was no sign of Champ. The moon was out and the air was still and clean and sweet, not like the smelly old city.

When Nita had finished Gail opened the door and called out to her mother.

"I think I'll walk around a bit. Okay? It's such a beautiful night."

"Go right ahead, dear. You're quite safe inside the yard. I'll leave this door unlocked but do lock it behind you when you come in."

"Sure."

Safe enough she thought as she went down the steps with Nita following. I suppose Mother is thinking of the dangers of the city. But the wall and the locked gate were a bit puzzling. Bellingburg had looked like a sleepy village. And no mention had been made of local dangers.

The yard and the countryside beyond the wall were both full of large yellow-leafy trees, making shadows in the moonlight. The grass was lovely and soft, rather tall, but pleasant to walk through. Now and then a car flashed along the highway, its headlights illuminating it all.

She was glad the Doberman was nowhere in sight.

There was something oppressive inside that house. She could not put her finger on what it was but she was glad to be out here in the night, alone with Nita.

She walked along the inside of the fence, using

it for her landmark. Once she stopped to lean against the fence, light a cigarette, and look up at the dark old house. All the blinds were drawn, and most rooms were dark. She was now on the side where the office was. There was a light there, surprisingly, this late in the evening. Her stepfather had said he was going for brandy, but it looked now as if he had gone back to work

Gail sat down on the front step, reached into her shirt pocket and lit another cigarette. She sat there for a long while, looking up at the stars, and now and then glimpsing the white figure of Nita scurrying in and out of the bushes.

Strange man, her stepfather. He was a good host and gallant toward his new wife, but his positive manner sometimes amounted almost to a kind of arrogance. Was that what had attracted her gentle, flibbertigibberty mother? Opposites attracting, as they said?

Strange man. His attitude toward herself seemed a bit strained. Was it just that he resented the fact of acquiring a twenty-one-year-old stepdaughter? But he had had children by his first wife. Mother had mentioned it today. How old were they? Where were they? And what about the first Mrs. Sorenson. What had she been like? What had happened to the marriage? Or had something happened to her?

There were a lot of things she would like to ask

her mother about. Perhaps this would be a good time, with Wolff shut up in his office.

She called to Nita, and went around to the back of the house, carefully locking the back door behind her, when she got inside. The Doberman must be somewhere in the house. If he slept inside, then she could let Nita do so as well. She hoped.

No lights on downstairs. She felt her way down the hall to where one small bulb was burning, then up the stairs.

The door to the office was closed.

On the third floor her mother's door stood partly open.

"Gail, is that you?" Carolyn called out. "Come and say good night!"

Gail realized she must have stayed out longer than she had intended to, for when she pushed the door the rest of the way open she saw that her mother was already in bed. She was sitting up, a glass of brandy on the table beside her. Her hair was drawn back in curlers, leaving her face pinched and older looking.

Gail perched on the foot of the bed.

"Mother, is it all right if Nita sleeps in the room with me? I'll close the door."

"Your room is your castle, darling, as is mine. Hello there, Nita, did you have a nice run?"

Nita put her front paws up on the bed and was petted.

Gail was wondering if this were a time they could talk. The door was open. Wolff might appear.

But before she could even begin a conversation, her mother was saying, "You haven't told me a thing about yourself. You're still at that nasty job?"

"It's not a nasty job! I like it."

"Are you still seeing that nice young man . . . what was his name, Bruce?"

Gail shook her head. "Bruce and I are splitsville."

"What on earth does that mean?"

"Oh, Mother! It means we're not seeing each other."

"Why not? He really was nice. And I did know his mother, back in school. Very good people."

"Yes, Mother."

She knew what Carolyn wanted for her. A husband, a home, not an art career and an art job. And of course Carolyn had considered Bruce an excellent candidate. After all, he came from a "good family." Now Gail realized that Bruce was definitely not the marrying kind. He had prattled a lot about "freedom," she remembered. His approach was a sort of casual intimacy.

"It didn't work out, Mother, that's all. He wasn't right . . . for me. Or, I suppose, me for him."

"And you're hurt."

"I'm recovering."

Her mother sipped her brandy and considered for a moment. Then, very softly, she said, "Don't you think Donald is nice?"

Gail had to laugh.

"He's invited me to go sightseeing tomorrow. If that makes you happy."

She could hear footsteps on the stairs.

"I'll say good night, now, Mother." She moved closer and bent to kiss her mother's cheek. Carolyn's thin arms reached out and held her close.

"Oh, Gail, baby, I'm so glad to see you! I'm so glad you came!" There was almost panic in her touch.

"I'm glad, too," Gail whispered as she pulled away.

Wolff was standing in the doorway.

"May I interrupt this tender scene to say good night to my wife?"

"Sure." Gail turned back to say, "Good night, Mother!" and then, with Nita following, she moved to the door. Wolff stood aside to let her pass.

"Good night," was all she could bring herself to say. Somehow it seemed too soon to call him Wolff.

"Good night, Gail," he said gravely. "Sleep well."

It was not easy to get to sleep, in spite of the comfortable bed and in spite of being rather weary.

It was the quiet. There were no sounds at all. That made the strangeness. In the apartment house in New York City you felt a part of the world. The elevator growling its way up or down. Footsteps overhead which each night at the same time moved this way and that and faded away. A neighbor's TV or radio purring away. That was what Gail was used to, not this eerie silence.

The lights were out, the curtains drawn, but the room was not in total darkness. Moonlight outlined the curtains and made great hulky shadows of the furniture.

Then she began to distinguish soft noises. Outside the window, somewhere in the night, a bird made a small sound, and a moment later a faraway cat mewed softly.

Nita jumped off the bed and ran over to the window, gently whimpering curiosity.

"Nita!" Gail whispered. "Come back here. Come to bed."

Slowly, still protesting vocally, Nita returned, jumped up on the foot of the bed, sighed, and went to sleep.

At last Gail did sleep, after she had tossed and turned and readjusted covers and plumped pillows a dozen times.

It was much later that she was awakened by a

familiar noise, although at first it was hard to identify. Nita, scratching at the door.

Gail rolled over sleepily.

"Oh, no, Nita, not now! You've been out practically all evening, and you don't want to go look for that crazy cat."

She turned on the light.

Nita still stood by the door, one paw up, big eyes beseeching.

"All right, all right," Gail whispered.

She found her robe and slippers.

No light around any of the doors on that floor. Hand on rail, she tiptoed down the two flights. This time she went directly to the front door which was the closest.

There was a big latch but it was not too difficult to operate. She opened the door just wide enough for Nita to slip through, held it open, and waited. Fortunately Nita had meant business, it was not the cat, and she was back in a moment.

Gail relocked to door and started up the stairs.

On the way up she noticed that the office door was open.

She had been curious about the place when Donald had hurried her out. The food interested her. Perhaps she could select some that appealed to her, and if Wolff had them on hand he would produce them for her. He did seem proud of the products he had for sale.

Most of them were in cans, or dehydrated.

Probably the most interesting would be in the freezer.

Very quietly she lifted the lid. Nita was immediately beside her, paws up, trying to look inside, sure it was an icebox.

Frozen quiche lorraine. Frozen coq au vin. And so on.

"Yum, yum," she said to Nita. "Many, many yum-yums."

She put down the lid and went back to the shelves.

Soups. Everything from kangaroo tail from Australia to turtle from Mexico, French mushroom, French onion, and . . .

There was a sound out in the hall. She turned. Nita, who had again been sniffing at that locked door, turned.

Champ burst in upon them, barking wildly.

Nita, tail between her legs, moved behind Gail.

Her heart in her mouth, Gail managed to say, "It's all right, Champ. It's all right."

From upstairs came Wolff's voice, "Champ, on guard!"

Champ stood stiff-legged, growling, as Gail and Nita slowly, oh so slowly, moved toward the door.

Chapter 3

Champ obeyed his orders and did not move. Gail and Nita made it to the door and out into the hall.

She was out of breath and trembling as hard as Nita was. She looked up. Wolff was at the top of the stairs.

"What's going on down there?" he asked.

Slowly she started to climb. "I'm sorry!" she called up to him. "Nita begged to go out. I had to let her."

"I see." But as she grew closer she could tell his eyes were still questioning. Then he asked, "Did Champ frighten you?"

"He certainly did!"

"He woke me up. He knew someone was in the office."

"The door was open," Gail told him. "I was just looking at the food samples. They're fascinating."

"Are they really?" He seemed surprised. "Gail, I'm sorry, but I much prefer only having people in my office by invitation. Even members of the family."

He was terribly, terribly polite. He made her feel that she had done a very boorish thing. As if she had behaved like a ten-year-old.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Yet at the same time she was wondering *why? Why?* She truly only had been looking at the samples. She wouldn't think of poking around his desk or meddling or even asking questions about his business affairs.

"Good night, again, Gail. I hope you and . . . your dog sleep more soundly this time."

She moved past him, Nita following, into her room, and closed the door.

She heard him call to Champ, heard Champ dashing up the stairs, a door close, and again, silence.

He obviously was restraining himself. Evidently his office was his castle. But why? Why?

The first thing Gail discovered in the morning was that it was a very late-sleeping household.

When she came downstairs there was nobody in sight.

The front parlor where they had had cocktails still was messy with dirty glasses and the hors d'oeuvre platter. The dining table was only partly cleared. The coffee cups and liqueur glasses still were there.

Yesterday had been the maid's day off, but evidently this morning she had not yet arrived. She, too, must be a late riser.

The kitchen-pantry-breakfast nook was big, and it could have been made charming. Like in many big apartments she had visited, Gail noted the contrast between the kitchen and the rest of the place. Hospital white walls, now tattle-tale gray. If this were her kitchen she would paint it in bright colors and hang up red and yellow iron pots and put flower pots along the top of the partition that separated the breakfast nook.

But it wasn't her kitchen.

However, she was ready for breakfast. Country air?

There was a jar of orange juice in the icebox, and milk for Nita. She found instant coffee in the cupboard and those Danish cookies.

Gail was finishing her second cup of coffee and her first cigarette in the breakfast nook, when the maid arrived.

She was a small scrawny creature with a face like a chicken's. She even sounded like a chicken when she said, "Hello!"And she seemed very surprised to see someone there in her kitchen.

"I'm Gail Fisher, Mrs. Sorenson's daughter," Gail introduced herself. "Down, Nita, don't jump on the lady!"

The chicken lady looked very cross. "I'm Marylou. You already had breakfast, I see."

"I hope it was all right just to go ahead."

"It's all right with me. Why not? Nobody else around here ever lifts a finger iffen they can help it. So I get a day off and the next day's twice as bad because nothing's been done."

"I can clean up these dishes," Gail said quickly. "I've nothing else to do."

Marylou had started to take off her coat. She stopped midway to stare. "You sure you're Mrs. Sorenson's daughter? Not that she ain't nice but . . ."

Gail smiled. "Housework was never Mother's line. Look, why don't I go bring in the stuff from the front room and dining room. Would that help?"

Before Marylou could answer the swinging door to the dining room was pushed part way open.

"Marylou," Wolff said, "where the devil's my bloody mary? And Mrs Sorenson's tray?"

"I just got here, Mr. Sorenson. Just this minute."

"Please hurry, then." The door swung shut.

Marylou's scrawny eyebrows lifted, and she shrugged.

It was time to let Nita out, and Gail decided to go with her.

Champ was outside, too. He and Nita, after a bit of tentative sniffs, raced each other around and around the yard. Apparently, the night before during the cocktail and dinner hour, the two had set up a kind of canine amicability. Nita, with her long thin legs—the whippet part of her inheritance—could easily outrun the Doberman on the short run, as she well knew. But she was a tease, dashing off with Champ in pursuit, suddenly wheeling to give him a laughing look, and abruptly changing her direction to whip around him in a long big circle.

The countryside was more beautiful by daylight than it had been under the moon. It was cloudy, though, and there was a very stiff wind.

The countryside was beautiful, yes, but the outside of the house and the yard, by daylight, had an appearance of shabby neglect. The house was nicely furnished, in a rather lavish fashion, but the outside had been ignored in recent years. The paint was a faded green-gray, like a muddy field uniform; the flowerbeds were overrun with weeds and some of the bushes just sagged against the sides of the house.

Again, as she had the night before, she circled the house, following the fence. She was trying to pick out the windows of the various rooms, including that of her bedroom. A row of shuttered win-

dows at the back of the house intrigued her. She guessed the area was right behind the office. A lot of unaccounted-for space.

She left Nita to run about the yard and when she went back into the house Marylou had cleared the parlor. Wolff was alone there with the morning paper, nursing a bloody mary.

"Want one of these?" he asked her.

"No, thanks. Not this early."

"Want part of the morning paper?"

"Thank you."

They sat opposite each other, both flipping at the paper, not really reading, now and then glancing at each other with the awkward feeling of two strangers finding each other alone together, too early in the morning. Like people in the waiting room of an airline terminal.

Once they both looked up at the same time, so Gail attempted conversation.

"This is a very old house, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Turn of the century at least. It was a show place in those days. Run down, of course. We . . . I bought it for a song."

We—He and his first wife.

"I enjoyed walking around the yard this morning," Gail went on.

"Not much to see."

Gail just waited, knowing the question was right there in her eyes.

"It used to be a show place, too." He picked up

his newspaper again. "My first wife was a garden bug. I don't have time for that sort of thing. And your mother doesn't seem to fancy it."

This surprised Gail. In the past her mother had spoken of having a place of her own, of having a garden. Once, when they had been stationed in southern California, she had grown lots of things.

Wolff rattled his newspaper. He asked, "What are you going to do with yourself this morning? It'll be ages, you know, before your mother is up."

"Donald's taking me for a ride."

"I see. Yes, that's right. Good, good." He looked at his watch. "Donald should be getting here any minute. Tell him to come up and see me before you take off, will you?"

"Sure."

A few minutes later she heard the honking and ran over to the window to watch the gate open, and Donald drive into the yard.

She was ready to go to the door and let him in, but to her surprise, as she stepped into the hall, she heard a key turn in the lock. He really was a trusted employee.

"Hi!" His broad face lit up at the sight of her. Standing like this, together, she realized how really big a fellow he was. He *must* have played football! His smart sports jacket and scarf, his trim trousers, made her wonder if her slacks and sweater made her a little underdressed, even for the country.

"Hi!" she answered him.

"You know what?" were his first words. "You've got the same blue eyes as your mother. I hadn't noticed last night. Maybe it's that blue sweater. It's pretty."

"Thank you. Is it the proper get-up for touring Bellingburg?"

"Couldn't be better. Ready to go?"

"I am. Oh, but Wolff said he wanted to see you first."

His face darkened. He muttered, "Of course. I'll be right back. Don't go away!"

"I won't."

There was a moment's trouble when she got into the car. Nita, as usual, followed her. Donald looked impatient as she got out of the car and petted and reassured the dog.

"I'm sorry," she said, as she climbed back into the car. "She's like a baby."

"With you she seems to be," he said shortly.

As they drove off, Gail said, "I take it, you're not a dog man?"

"What?"

"You don't care much for dogs."

"Oh, sure, I like dogs. Sure, sure." But he was not convincing.

He became absorbed in driving his big car. He drove too fast for her to see more than a blur of scenery shimmering past. When they hit a bump

and she bounced and let out a little murmur of surprise he said, "Sorry. I guess I was hitting it up a little on this hick road."

"It's quite a contrast from the highway," she agreed. A moment later she added, "You know, something's been puzzling me. Why does Wolff have his office way out here?"

He gave her a quick glance then put his eyes back on the road and said, without turning his head, "I guess it's just because he loves the country."

"Oh?"

"What do you mean, 'oh?' "

Gail hesitated. She did not want to sound as if she were criticizing her stepfather. "It's just that he doesn't seem like the country type. I was just noticing this morning that the yard is a bit neglected."

Donald laughed. "Oh, that. The garden. That was Genevieve's domain."

"Genevieve?"

"The first Mrs. Sorenson."

"Oh, yes. Wolff was telling me this morning."

"He was? I'm surprised."

"Well, I did sort of have to pull it out of him."

"I'll bet."

After a few moments Gail asked, "Did you know the first Mrs. Sorenson?"

"Oh, yes." His tone was not one of enthusiasm.

"Was she . . . anything like my mother?"

His laugh was bitter. "Good lord, no. Genevieve was a big horse of a woman. The bossy type. Her house. Her garden. Frankly, I did not like her."

"I see."

"She had one asset," Donald went on. "Why am I putting her in the past tense? I just think of her that way. I think Wolff does, too, although I'm sure she's alive and well . . . somewhere."

"What was that one asset?" Gail asked.

"You're a curious kid, aren't you?" Donald laughed. "Money," he said. "Pots of it."

It was difficult for Gail to imagine Wolff married to a bossy woman. Was money the answer? Now, Gail, don't start making nasty assumptions. But her curiosity about Wolff's past was growing.

"How old are the children?" was her next question.

"The kids? I don't know. Ten—twelve. They weren't around much. Off at school. Just kids."

Their road was parallel to the highway now, and ahead of them, down in a valley, were the roofs and the church steeple of Bellingburg.

Donald laughed again. "You asked me if Genevieve were anything like your mother. That really got me. Your mother . . . she's just plain sweet. She's been awfully good to me. Treats me almost like a member of the family." He gave her a shy smile.

"Mother is . . . sweet," Gail agreed.

Mother is sweet and vulnerable, she thought, and something is troubling her. When I get back today I'm going to try to get a chance to talk to her alone. Maybe, in spite of all her caution, she will let something drop.

Bellingburg had one important crossroad, with its only traffic light. A church, a bank, a general store, and the post office occupied the four corners.

Donald parked the car in front of the post office. "This is it," he said. "Town. Most of it. I've got to make a few stops. Would you like to walk around for a bit? Window shop?"

Gail had not expected this, but she was not unwilling. She never had been in such a tiny village before, except in Europe when she was a kid. This, she told herself, will be pure Americana.

"Sure," she agreed. "Fine. How long shall I wander?"

He looked at his watch. "An hour? More or less? I'll keep my eye out for you. You won't get lost. Meet you here at the car. I'll leave it unlocked. One does, here in Bellingburg."

Her first impression was of the mixture that Bellingburg was. Half quaint New England—a grocery store in what had been a gingerbread decorated home—a hardward store with practical articles displayed on the sidewalk—a Village Inn,

new imitation nineteenth century antique and-or junk shops. The people on the streets were a mixture, too. It was easy to distinguish the weekend visitors in pants and sweaters or sport shirts and the natives, more somberly sensibly dressed, with impassive yet curious eyes.

Within an hour she felt that she had covered Bellingburg and went back to the car. No sign of Donald. She had spotted a drugstore and decided it was time for more coffee, and perhaps a little more breakfast. If the drugstore had a lunch counter.

It did.

There were only a few customers, chatting inconsequentialities with the girl behind the counter, who had a friendly smile and who brought out a cup and started to pour coffee before Gail had said a word.

"How did you know I was going to order coffee?"

"I was expecting you to order a martini?" was the girl's answer.

"What if I'd wanted tea?" Gail teased.

"Nobody wants tea," the girl said.

The man who was sitting next to Gail said, "Except old man Higham."

"That's right," the counter girl agreed. "That's why we got tea bags under the counter. We slip tea to those who order it. Now, toast? Roll? Hotcakes?"

"A roll will be fine."

The man beside her pushed the sugar bowl in Gail's direction. "Morning," he said.

He was a gaunt middle-aged man in rough clothes. The tan on his balding forehead, along with every other aspect, made her know he was a local.

"Morning," she replied.

Her years in New York had made Gail unused to casual conversations with people at lunch counters. But the man had a pleasant face, and he was monosyllabic polite.

"Visitor?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

That was the speed at which their conversation progressed.

She had just finished her roll when Donald walked into the drugstore.

"Hi!" Gail cried. "You found me."

"Morning," the man beside her said again.

Donald only nodded in his direction.

"Want some coffee?" Gail asked.

"No, no thank you. Are you almost finished?"

"Yes."

"I'll get it." He walked off toward the cash register.

Gail got off her stool. There was curiosity now in the stranger's eyes.

She smiled. "Nice to have met you."

"You didn't really." He put out his hand. "Name's Wilcott. John Wilcott."

"Gail Fisher," she answered, shaking hands.

"Gail!" Donald called from the front.

She followed him out of the drugstore.

When they got into the car Gail said, "That was a nice man, Mr. Wilcott. Do you know him? Or does he say 'morning' to everybody?"

"He's a local. Neighbor." Donald shrugged. "Sorry I was so long."

"Business all done?"

He nodded.

"I shouldn't think the people of Bellingburg would go much for foreign foods."

"What? Oh, no, no, they don't. Strictly New England boiled stuff. No, that's why I'm taking you to lunch at a little place on the way to the falls. Italian. You like Italian?"

"Sure."

Donald had been terse and businesslike in the village, but he seemed to mellow as they rolled out of town and swung along the old, twisted dirt road. The hills around them were covered with the brilliant red and gold of autumn. The houses were scattered, a few modern ranch types, others were old-fashioned two-story affairs, like well preserved but fragile old ladies, the sort of structures that made Gail long for her paint brush.

"Well, all this is Belling Valley," Donald said. "Fine climate in the summer. Never too hot. The

winters, though, are horrible. A fine place to work but no place to live. For example, year around, the night life is absolutely non-existent."

"I think Belling Valley, and Bellingburg are fun!" Gail told him. "They're picture-book."

Donald glanced at her. "Oh?" as if he did not quite understand. "You know what?" he added. "I'd like to see you, sometime, in New York. Where the action is."

Gail nodded and smiled. But she was not quite sure if she would like to see him in town, or not. He was nice, as Mother said, but Gail could not help being doubtful about someone with his turn-on surface manners. It was like a magnificent coating . . . covering what kind of a person?

The food was fair, the service abominable, in the little shack of an "Italian" restaurant. The quotes were around it in Gail's mind. The food could have come out of cans. The proprietors were definitely not Italian. The only real authenticity about the place were the travel posters blotted on the unpleasant pink walls.

Donald smiled at her engagingly, he spoke of New York restaurants he knew. And Boston restaurants. Boston had been his home. But he seemed nervous, now and then glancing at his watch.

She thanked him for lunch and once more he looked at his watch and said, "Now, the falls," as if he were a tourist guide.

They drove deeper and deeper into the woods. They came to a narrow, fragile bridge, thin as a pencil line across the landscape, and just beyond they reached the falls.

The falls were a complete surprise, in the midst of that gentle rolling countryside. They were like a series of wide blue-silver steps, flowing down from the hills. Gail stood before them, ecstatic. What fun it would be to paint them, at all different seasons! She saw the four paintings, hanging on the wall in a cool room: spring, with all the greenery just beginning, summer in full bloom, as they were now in autumn, such a sharp contrast to the red and yellow leaves, and in winter . . . would they be frozen? She thought of them as a white mass of frozen movement.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" She turned to Donald.

He fiddled with his ear, nervously.

"They always make me think of an advertisement for menthol cigarettes."

"Oh, Donald!"

"Sorry. I forgot you were an artist."

He put his hand on her shoulder. What did he think she was, really? Just an available girl out here in what he obviously considered a wilderness? She moved away from his touch.

"Hadn't we better be getting back?" she asked him. "After all, I'm supposed to be visiting my mother this weekend and we've been gone for hours."

For the thousandth time, it seemed, Donald looked at his watch.

"All right. Sure. I guess so."

On the way back he drove even faster. She tried not to be nervous but there was something frantic about even the way his hands held the wheel that was disturbing.

It was late afternoon when they finally reached the house. Donald honked, but when there was no answer, he got out of the car and went through some trickery that opened the gate.

The front door opened and Nita came gambolling down the flagstone path to bestow a most enthusiastic welcome.

Carolyn was standing in the doorway when they got to the house.

"Darlings, I thought you'd never come!"

"Sorry, Mother."

Donald did not offer an apology. "Where's Wolff?" he asked. "Isn't he in the office?"

"He's out. He had to go out," Carolyn explained. "But he said to ask you to wait for him. Stay for dinner, if he's not back. Not that you're not always welcome. Marylou is cooking her boiled dinner special."

"Thank you, thank you." Donald hurried past her up the stairs.

Gail turned to her mother.

"I really am sorry we stayed out so long."

"But you had a good time? That's all that really matters."

"We should have waited until you woke up, and taken you along."

Carolyn shrugged. "Darling, I've seen that little village and those falls many times. Besides, when Donald's away, Wolff usually stays pretty close to home and I get more of a chance to be with him. Then he can relax. With me. If he has a moment."

Gail looked at her watch. "Good grief, it is late. I'd better clean up before dinner."

"Come and sit down for a minute, first, won't you? We'll have a little drinkie . . ."

Carolyn's gay pink-and-yellow print dress ruffled as she hurried into the living room and across to the bar. She seemed much more cheerful than she had been when they said good night the evening before.

She handed Gail the anticipated daiquiri.

"Now, Gail, tell me what you think of this old house?"

Gail slumped on the davenport and thought for a moment. "Well," she finally said, "to tell you the truth it's not at all what I expected."

"No? Why not?"

"It's big, like you said. And old. But it's kind of . . . run down."

"I know, I know. I simply have not had time to do anything about anything. And . . ." She hesitated. "And, then, of course, Wolff likes it as it is.

He keeps telling me that. He did let me fix up the guest room, your room. But he's not interested, really, in entertaining. Nor am I," she added loyally. "I mean, after all those parties in New York, I like the quiet life, too."

Gail looked at her mother in surprise. Carolyn had never, never liked the quiet life until now. If she were telling the truth.

"You're happy then."

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" Just a little too enthusiastic. Carolyn twisted her martini glass around and around. "Wolff was such a lonely man when I met him. I felt so sorry for him, living alone in this big old house . . ."

"His first wife left him, then?"

"That's right. Cruel. Heartless. Left him without warning, took the children. She had poisoned the children against him. He was terribly hurt. He almost cried when he told me about it."

The scene was difficult for Gail to picture. It was hard to imagine someone as self-assured as Wolff ever breaking down.

"It was her house. She bossed him. She was that kind of woman. Which is why I am doing my best not to mind his . . . idiosyncracies. Do you understand?"

Gail nodded.

"He works hard. Too hard. Sometimes he can be most . . . irritable. I try to be patient with him You must be patient, too."

"Of course." She wanted to cry out, what is it, Mother, what are you covering up? But while she was hesitating, trying to find the right words, Donald walked into the room.

Chapter 4

This time it was Gail who looked at her watch. There was no use going on talking to Mother, now.

"I'll go change," she said. "I'll actually put on a dress, like a lady."

"Yes, dear," her mother agreed. "And do do something about your hair!"

"Yes, Mother." Gail winked. Mother's command was old as the hills. Ever since Gail could remember her mother had been trying to make her daughter appearance-conscious. And no matter what Gail did to pretty herself, it was either not right, or not enough, according to Carolyn.

Gail remembered what Donald had said about

her sweater matching her eyes, and chose her blue jersey dress. What could be done about that hair? As she brushed it she thought of what her mother had told her about Wolff. How much of it was true? Why couldn't she just take her mother's word for it? Why did she mistrust her stepfather? Why was she downright pleased that he was not in the house, that he might not come back to dinner?

She held her hair somewhat in place with a blue band, satisfied herself with a glance in the mirror, and went downstairs.

The nervousness that Donald had displayed on their ride home had disappeared by dinner. Gail decided he must have been worried about some office matter, and had had time to clear it up, since they got back. But he was very quiet, and rather absent-minded.

The dinner turned out to be better than what Gail had anticipated of a New England boiled dinner. The corned beef was better than any canned stuff she ever had bought, and the vegetables were fresh and tender, but not soggy.

"It's awfully good!" Gail told Marylou, when she passed the second helpings, but Marylou did not smile.

When the kitchen door swung shut behind the maid Gail said, "She's a funny one. Are all the people around here so taciturn? Even that man I

met in the drugstore this morning was . . . I don't know how to put it. Cool-friendly."

"The locals are like that," Donald said.

"It's just Marylou's way," Carolyn explained. "She's been here too long."

"You mean, before you?"

Carolyn nodded. "Before me. I am . . . an interloper."

Genevieve's maid, of course, Gail thought. Why on earth had Carolyn kept her on?

Her mother must have guessed her thoughts. She said, "Maids are hard to get, you know. And she is a good cook."

Then Carolyn began chattering about old friends, asking questions about those she had not seen lately. Now and then she would toss in an explanatory phrase for Donald's benefit, such as, "Emily was the one we met in Shanghai, we've not much in common but old times, but she's a dear," or "Fred was my first husband's best man and he is Gail's godfather." Obviously Donald was not the least interested, his mind was far far away in another world.

After apple pie a la mode and plain old American coffee, they hurried out of the dining room so Marylou could clear and wash up.

Carolyn offered brandy, but they both declined.

"I ate too much," Gail protested.

Suddenly she remembered. "Good grief, I'd better go feed Nita."

"Marylou told me she fed both dogs and put both dogs outside," Carolyn explained.

"Good. But then I'd better see if Nita wants in."

They were still standing, just inside the living room. As Gail turned to go her mother said, "Why don't you two take the dogs for a run? I'm sure they'd love it."

Donald and Gail looked at each other. Gail was sure he saw through her mother's obvious transparency as well as she did.

Carolyn went on. "There's my Friday night TV show that I just love and you don't like at all, Gail, remember?"

Still transparent.

"I think a breath of air would be nice, after that big dinner," Donald was saying. "Let's sit on the steps for a cigarette and let the dogs do the running."

"All right." Gail laughed.

The sky was carpeted with stars.

There was no wind tonight. In the dark the only movement seemed to be the throbbing of those twinkling stars.

"Nita?" Gail called. "Nita?" Her voice echoed in the silence.

"Have a cigarette." Donald was holding out a package.

She took one absently. A moment later Nita bounded out of the bushes for a warm greeting.

Then Champ galloped up. Nita promptly swirled and skimmed across the lawn, Champ following.

"That poor Doberman spends a lot of time shut up in the office, doesn't he? He needs a good run." Gail was thinking aloud.

"The office is the dog's job," Donald said shortly.

"Is it really necessary to guard the office?" Gail wondered.

"Wolff thinks so."

They sat down on the steps and smoked in silence, until at last Gail said, "This is the darkest dark I ever saw. Except for all those stars."

"The stars are light enough," Donald answered.

When Gail finished her cigarette, tossed it onto the ground, she again called to Nita. This time there was no answer.

She started down the steps, still calling. The flagstones were faintly visible from the starlight and the path of light from the glass of the front door.

"Wait a minute . . ."

Donald caught up with her, took hold of her hand. His big hand was very gentle and it was pleasant moving together, under those stars. They reached the gate and stopped, turned, looked up at the one lighted window. The living room. Now, faintly, there was the sound of Carolyn's TV program.

"Nita!" She tried again.

Donald was still holding her hand. His voice was not much more than a whisper. "Forget the dog, for a moment. She can't get out of the yard."

It was a long time since anyone had held her hand like this, so gently, almost as if she were a child. Bruce had been like this when she first knew him, shy, holding back. She remembered the first time he touched her, like this. They were at the movies. She had been so surprised, so stimulated by just the touch, that she forgot about the movie, she lost the thread of the plot . . .

The feeling was the same tonight, although she was telling herself that this man was a stranger, that she only had met him yesterday.

"Gail," he whispered. "Oh, Gail . . ."

His voice was still low, but it was close to being hoarse.

Nita and Champ were faintly visible, close to the house. They spun past, around to the back of the house.

"See? They're all right," Donald whispered. He let go of her hand and slipped his arm around her waist. It was comforting, it was pleasant, part of the beautiful night. But when his other arm went around her, she began to pull away.

"Please, Donald . . . not so fast . . ."

"Come on, Gail!" The gentleness had gone out of his voice. He was angry.

He held her now in a firm, painful grip.

She could not see his face, but she was sure he was not looking at her as he had before. His face came closer and closer and his mouth crushed down on hers.

It was an ugly, primitive kiss, his tongue and his teeth possessing her, it took all of her strength to jerk her mouth free, to cry out, "Donald, no!"

She pulled her face from one side to the other, straining her neck; she raised her voice: "Stop it!"

Then there was a new sound in the night.

Champ's low growl.

Chapter 5

It all happened quickly. Champ was poised for a lunge at Donald; Donald let go of her. Then came the sound of a car, headlights shining.

Gail ran for the house.

She stumbled up the steps, Nita at her heels, pushed open the door, slammed it behind her.

What had happened? How had Donald changed so quickly from a quiet, attractive stranger to a wild man?

She was out of breath, and shaking, as she slowly moved toward the door to the living room.

Carolyn looked up from her TV, her face all surprise. Then she reached over and turned off the set.

"Gail, what is it?"

Gail went on into the living room, gave a big sigh, and slumped down on the nearest chair. The band was loose in her hair. She took it off and ran her fingers through the tangles. She could not answer her mother immediately. She was still too full of shock. But she must pull herself together; she must not upset her mother.

Carolyn had run to the bar cart. She poured a brandy and came back to Gail.

"Here, drink this. Gail, what happened?"

Gail accepted the brandy, sipped it, and then she said, as calmly as she could, "Your nice Donald . . . your polite Mr. Bishop . . . was . . . impolite."

"Oh, no!"

Gail sat up a little straighter.

"It's all right, Mother. Nothing . . . happened. Champ rescued me." She grinned ruefully.

Nita snuggled close to her. She looked down at the dog. "You were a big help," she said to Nita, avoiding her mother's face. "You're a sissy."

The front door opened and closed again and a moment later Wolff was in the doorway and there was the sound of Donald's footsteps on the stairs.

"Hello, dear," Wolff said to Carolyn. "Sorry to be so late." Then he looked down at Gail, his eyes full of amusement. He must have seen her running into the house and guessed what had happened—

or Donald had told him his version. To him it was all a huge joke. He said, "Hello, child."

"Hello," she said shortly.

Carolyn was at her husband's side.

"Did you have dinner? Can I fix you anything?"

"I had dinner, thank you. Now you go back to your TV, you two. I've work to do."

He went out of the room and closed the doors behind him.

Carolyn gave a little sigh. "Well, there he goes again," she said quietly.

"Is he always like this, in and out—or is it because I'm here?" Gail asked.

"Oh, it's not you, dear, not at all. He's always like this. He's a very busy man."

"So you told me. So I see."

She sipped her brandy.

"I shall speak to Donald first thing in the morning." Carolyn spoke firmly.

"Oh, Mother, don't! He won't bother me again, I'm sure."

"All the same . . ."

"All the same, I should have known better than to go out in the dark with someone I scarcely know. Well, I think I'm ready to turn in."

"I imagine you are." Carolyn looked at the TV set. "I'll wait up awhile. Maybe Wolff will finish work . . ."

Again Gail had difficulty in sleeping. She tried not to think about the scene with Donald, but it had upset her. She also tried not to think of her mother and her stepfather, and their relationship. True or not, her mother believed, or desperately was trying to tell herself that Wolff deserved her love and loyalty. But there had been a kind of apologetic nervous expression on her face when she talked about Wolff.

Then tonight, instead of ominous silence, there were noises. First the telephone began ringing. In the quiet night it seemed louder and more persistent than usual. It rang several times and in between ringings she would try to go to sleep, only to be jerked awake again and again.

Finally, thoroughly awake, she turned on her light and lit a cigarette.

Now there were other noises. A mumbling of voices and footsteps, directly below her bedroom.

The office, she remembered now. She looked at her watch. After midnight, and Wolff was still at work!

It went on for quite awhile, long after she had finished her cigarette and put out her light. At last she heard footsteps on the stairs and the front door opening and closing. She got up and went over to the window and pulled the blind aside. The gate was open and several cars zoomed off into the night.

There were no more sounds except Wolff's footsteps and the opening and closing of his door. Then the house was absorbed again in that enormous silence.

When she got to sleep at last, she dreamed. Again she was in the yard, in the dark, running, Donald running after her, not Donald the friendly football player fellow with shy eyes and flattering glances but a kind of giant ape with teeth as large as Champ's . . .

He caught up with her, held her tightly, she could smell his foul breath . . .

She awoke with a scream.

Nita, who had been lying on the rug beside the bed, suddenly had her paws on the bed, was poking her cold nose at Gail.

"Nita, come on up! Nita, sleep with me!"

Nita wriggled a lot, and snored, but all the same Gail was glad to have someone beside her.

Again Gail was the first to waken the next morning. And again, no sign of Marylou.

After breakfast, when she opened the door for Nita to go out, there was Champ on the back doorstep, wistfully waiting. So she gave him milk, as she had given to Nita, and he lapped it gratefully, looked up at her afterward and wagged his tail, for the first time.

"Well, Champ," she said, "then we're friends?"

She patted his head while Nita wriggled with jealousy. "Champ's a good dog and a noble dog. He rescues young ladies."

Maybe she should not have been frightened by Donald, maybe it was just his way. Could he be the type who, basically shy, when finally aroused, drive themselves in fast, frantic action? She certainly must put a damper on him, at any rate.

She went outside in the morning sunshine, to again walk around the prison-like yard, both dogs at her heels.

She had made the complete circle of the fence at least twice when a small sports car came along the road and stopped at the gate. Evidently the person driving did not know about the signal for the gate because he simply stopped the car, turned off the engine.

Gail moved closer and looked through the bars of the gate. The young man at the wheel smiled at her.

"Hi, there, when's opening time?" he called out. His eyes were twinkling gray and he was grinning.

Gail laughed. "I wouldn't know," she said. "I'm just a visitor here."

He looked at his watch. "Ten o'clock," he mumbled. "Most businesses . . ."

"I don't think Sorenson's is most businesses. He has odd hours."

"Is he in, Mr. Sorenson? That's who I've come to see."

"He's in. He lives here. But I don't think he's awake yet. Maybe you ought to wait a bit before you start honking your horn."

"Why on earth should I do that?"

"It's the way you signal for someone to operate the gate."

"Oh."

"Should I run up and see if he's awake?"

"Don't rush off. I'm in no hurry. I can wait a bit."

He opened the door and stepped out of the car. His woolly turtle-necked sweater almost matched his shaggy sideburns.

He leaned on the top of the gate.

"I'm Ben Haynes," he said. "You're . . . ?"

"Gail Fisher." She reached up her hand. "And this is Nita—and Champ." Nita wagged her tail but Champ gave a low growl, until she patted him on the head.

"How do you do." He shook hands. "So you're a visitor."

"For the weekend. My mother is Mrs. Sorenson."

"Oh?" His eyebrows arched. He looked up at the house. "Straight out of Charles Adams. Does it have ghosts and things that go boom in the night?"

"I think so. At least . . ." Gail thought a moment, then added, "It's a strange, interesting house."

He had stopped looking at the house. He was

concentrating on Gail, on all her blonde hair tossed about in the morning wind.

The sound of a car made them turn and look down the road. It seemed like a big moose of a vehicle, twice the size of the little sports car, it swooped down the road, as if it were carrying some king or president to an important rendezvous, and slammed to a stop just behind Ben Haynes' car. Donald jumped out.

He looked hard at both Gail and Ben, questioning.

"This is Mr. Haynes," Gail said. "He's come to see Wolff."

"I'm Donald Bishop, Mr. Sorenson's assistant. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Sorenson."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No. Can I make one? Like for today? I've driven all the way out from New York City."

"Perhaps I can help you."

"I'd rather see Mr. Sorenson."

Gail wondered why Donald was trying to protect Wolff from such a pleasant young man.

"I'm in charge when Mr. Sorenson is away," Donald went on. "I usually take care of most of his customers."

Ben Haynes' smile faded for the first time. "I'm not a customer," he said quietly.

Now he seemed hesitant. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pipe and took moments

lighting it, before he said another word. When he began it was with almost a stammer. "It's like this. I represent a magazine . . ."

Donald interrupted. "I can assure you Mr. Sorenson is not interested in subscribing to any more magazines."

"I'm not selling subscriptions," Ben Haynes said quietly. "It's about . . . an article. I'm quite sure Mr. Sorenson would be interested. I'd like to interview him."

"Well," Donald spoke quickly, "I can ask him." He hesitated. "First, could you get your car out of the way?"

"Certainly!"

Ben climbed back into his car and moved it to the side of the road and Donald moved up to the gate and honked. The gate opened promptly, and stayed open long enough for both cars to be driven through.

Donald, followed by Champ, hurried into the house.

"Well, so far, so good." Ben smiled at Gail. "Mr. Sorenson seems to be a bit of a recluse."

"Not really."

A few moments later there was a sharp whistle. They looked up. From the front porch Donald was waving an okay.

The two young men disappeared upstairs to the office. Gail went out into the kitchen to see about more coffee. Marylou was fixing a breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Marylou."

"Morning."

"Is that for my mother?"

"Betcher life."

"May I take it up to her?"

"Be my guest. The backstairs is quicker." She pointed to a door that Gail had not noticed before.

There was a pot of coffee on the tray, so Gail asked, "May I take another cup? Is there enough for two?"

"More than enough. She don't ever finish." Marylou reached for another cup.

Gail took the tray and Marylou opened the door.

The backstairs were shorter, and steeper. As Gail climbed past the second floor she thought of the shuttered windows she had seen from outside. So much space in this house apparently was not used at all.

She tapped on her mother's door with her toe and Carolyn answered, "Come in, Marylou." The door was ajar and Gail pushed it open.

"Oh, it's you, dear! What a nice surprise."

Carolyn was sitting up in bed with an armed cushion about her.

Gail pulled out the tray's little legs and put it across her mother's lap.

"It's nice seeing a smiling face. Marylou usually frowns at me. She disapproves of breakfast in bed,

I can hardly blame her, having to climb all those stairs every morning, but I adore it, and Wolff insists I should have it."

"Not much breakfast."

"You know me, darling, nothing but juice and coffee and a croissant. Do you know these are actually made in France and flown over? Frozen, of course."

"It looks good."

"Didn't Marylou offer you any for your breakfast?"

Gail laughed. "I was up long before Marylou arrived. I fixed my own."

"You poor dear."

"It was fun. It's fun to have such a real kitchen."

Carolyn shook her head. "You're a born homebody, my daughter. What are you doing working, working your days away and painting by yourself at night?"

"Mother! I don't stay home every night. I go out!"

"But you haven't found him yet."

"Found who?"

"Don't be silly. The right man, of course."

"Nope." Gail poured coffee into the two cups.

"I'm sorry about Donald." Carolyn sounded almost shy.

"It's okay. I'm okay. Eat your breakfast."

A moment later, after nibbling on her croissant, Carolyn asked, "Did you sleep well?"

"Not too well," Gail admitted. "My goodness, Wolff does business at the oddest hours! I didn't really get to sleep until the office quieted down."

"I'm sorry. Oh, I am sorry! It doesn't happen every night, I promise you."

"It's all right. I'll survive. But I am curious. Why so late at night?"

"I don't know." Carolyn's thin little hand was trembling as she picked up her coffee cup. "I don't know a thing about Wolff's work. Although his business office is in our home, he's very particular about keeping it separate. I've barely stepped into the office and been shooed out."

"Like I was the other night."

"What?"

"I guess I didn't tell you. Nita wandered into the office night before last and Champ was on guard and then Wolff appeared and he didn't look very happy about it."

"Oh, no. No. Wolff's very particular about his office."

Her mother looked so nervous, so frightened. Gail could watch her pulling into herself, burying her true emotions beneath her heavy pride.

"Mother, what is it?"

A futile question, of course. Fluttery little Carolyn had a steel stubbornness, as Gail knew full well.

"Nothing, dear. I have a slight headache. And I really don't want any more breakfast. Would you be a doll and take the tray?" She leaned back and put a hand over her eyes.

Gail knew there was nothing to do but obey.

Downstairs, after she had delivered the tray to the kitchen, she went into the living room. The men were still up in the office, and the main floor was deserted. Marylou, for all her glumness, was a hard worker. Already the living room was spotless.

Yesterday's newspaper was on the coffee table. Gail turned the pages idly, glancing at headlines, but thinking about her mother. Carolyn was only pretending to be happy. If she regretted her marriage, she was not about to admit it to anyone, not even her own daughter. That was Carolyn's way.

The morning wore on and Gail began to wonder what she would do with herself this day. Go for a ride by herself? Or just wait for her mother to come down and see what she had to offer.

Footsteps on the stairs. She looked up.

Ben Haynes stood in the entrance to the living room.

"May I come in?"

"Of course."

He looked around the room, curiously.

"Are you all finished with your interview?" Gail asked him.

"Yes . . . and no. I mean, Mr. Sorenson thinks I'm finished, but I'm not." He grinned.

"Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks." He perched on the arm of one of the big chairs.

Gail put her newspaper aside. "Tell me about your magazine," she said. "What's it's name?"

"*Food.*" He got out his pipe.

"*Food?* Just *Food?* I'm sorry, I never heard of it."

His eyes were twinkling. "Not many people have. It's sort of . . . a trade journal."

"Oh."

"It's nothing like *Family Circle*, if that's what you're thinking. I mean pretty colored pictures and recipes like what's the latest thing to do with peanut butter."

"I see."

"You probably don't, but it doesn't matter. *Food* is pretty technical. In its quaint way. But enough of shop talk. Tell me about you."

"What about me?" Gail smiled.

"Well, you said you were just a visitor. Where do you live? Let me guess. New York."

"Right."

"Me, too. East 55th Street."

Gail's mouth fell open in surprise. "I'm West 55th Street. Isn't that funny?"

"Just a cross-town bus apart. Let's get together some time."

"How do you know I'm not married?"

"I'm a gambler. Did I lose?"

"I'm not married," she said slowly, "if that's what you mean."

"You live alone?"

It could be a leading remark. She had made it a policy to by-pass that question on many an occasion, but there was something straightforward, frank about this young man. She liked him. She said, "Well, there's Nita."

"Nita?"

"My dog."

"Oh yes. The big Doberman."

"No, Champ lives here. Mine's the fox terrier bull terrier whippet."

"Sounds like a triple chaperone." He laughed. "Well, I live with my mudder and fadder and my little brudder. So we're even." He looked away, and now he sounded almost shy. "Are you in the phone book, Miss Fisher? You see, I did remember your name. And the first one is something windy."

"Gail. I never thought of it that way. It isn't spelled that way. It's Gail, like in pail. Or jail. No, I guess I should say mail. Like from the post office."

"It doesn't matter. I'm a lousy speller. Is Fisher spelled like the man with the rod, or is it one of those difficult ones?"

She smiled. "Like the man with the rod."

"I was thinking of looking you up in the phone book some day."

He stood up as if he were about to leave. Then he shoved his pipe, which had already gone out, into his pocket.

"What about now?" he asked. "How about lunch?"

Chapter 6

Gail only hesitated for a moment. True, he was a total stranger, but she did not want to stay in the house. What was the point in staying, with Mother off with her "headache" and only Wolff and Donald for company?

"Why, thank you," she said. "I'd like to go out to lunch." She looked down at her slacks and sweater. "Perhaps I should change?"

"Don't. Stay informal, like me."

"All right. But I'll tell my mother I'm going out."

"Sure."

Her mother was sound asleep. Gail ran into her room and wrote a note, stopped only long enough to tie up her hair with a piece of red yarn.

When she came down Ben was sitting on the front steps, petting Nita.

He got up. "Let's take her along," he said. "She looks hungry."

"Nita always looks hungry. But I'm sure she'd love to go."

"I forgot," Ben said, "about that gate. How the devil do we get out of this place?"

"I guess you honk again."

"And they'll let down the drawbridge." But he was unsmiling, rather thoughtful as he spoke.

They walked out to the car and he backed it around, headed toward the gate, honked the horn.

Gail turned and looked up at the office window. Donald was staring down at them. He was too far away for her to see the expression on his face, but she could imagine how surprised he must be. She chuckled, and waved. Donald's face disappeared, and the gate swung open.

Gail was glad she had tied up her hair, not only was the day turning out to be windy, but they were driving in a little open sports car.

Ben did not drive as fast as Donald had, but it seemed faster, out in the open.

"I checked the town on the way through," Ben called out over the noise of the wind. "There's not much choice of eating places except a dump called

Ye Village Inn. The local hotel. Probably dreadful."

Gail thought of the Italian restaurant. She certainly did not want to go there again. She tried to remember what else she had seen on her brief tour of the village.

"There's a drugstore!" she shouted back.

"I hate eating in drugstores. I can always smell the toothpaste. And the medicine. Ugh. Village Inn, here we come."

After they parked the car they stopped in front of Ye Village Inn and looked at the building. Shiny new-shingled roof and brick walls.

"You know what it looks like?" Ben said. "A cheap Christmas card."

They stood there laughing, while Nita dashed over, excitedly happy at the sight of a curb.

"Morning, Miss Fisher."

Gail turned.

"Good morning, Mr. . . . oh, dear, I forgot!"

"Wilcott."

"Mr. Wilcott."

"Enjoying your visit?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, Mr. Wilcott, this is Ben Haynes. Another visitor."

"Where you folks staying? The Inn?"

"I'm just here for the day," Ben answered.

"I'm at the Sorenson's," Gail added. "Do you know them?"

He nodded soberly. "Newcomers."

Gail smiled. "My mother is a newcomer. She's Mrs. Sorenson."

"Oh?"

"But Wolff—my stepfather—has lived here for several years."

"Still a newcomer," Mr. Wilcott insisted. "Newcomers are different."

"How do you mean, different, sir?" Ben asked.

Wilcott regarded Ben carefully, looking him over, sizing him up. "Night time," he said at last. "They're night people."

"Oh?" Ben looked at Gail.

She remembered her mother's talk of the "quiet life."

"But my mother and my stepfather travel a lot. They're away a lot of the time. And I wouldn't have thought of them as the partying kind. I'm surprised."

"Wouldn't know about parties," Wilcott said. "I'm around the bend. All I know is I hear them cars at night. Even when, like you say, the Sorensons aren't around."

"I'm sorry if they bother you," Gail said politely, remembering how the cars had kept her awake the night before.

"Not bothered. Puzzled." Mr. Wilcott tipped his old hat. "Nice seeing you, Miss Fisher. Nice meeting you," to Ben. Then he moved on.

"Exhibit A," Gail said, when the man was out of earshot. "Typical local character."

Ben only nodded.

They went into the inn, through the chromium-plastic-formica lobby into the dining room.

There were only a few customers. A fake fireplace, with an imitation electric fire, wore a series of cardboard advertisements for beer on its mantel.

They chose one of the little booths with the church bench backs. The table was covered with a plastic plaid table cloth and picnic-style salt and pepper shakers.

"My apologies, milady," Ben said.

Gail laughed. "It's so fake, it's funny. Reminds me of the place I was yesterday. Fake-Italian. The quaint countryside just ain't quaint."

"Thus goeth the world."

"At any rate, it's nice to go out for lunch," Gail reassured him.

"You mean like the shoeman's son going barefoot—back there in that fortress of food one goes hungry?"

"Lord, no. The food's great. But the atmosphere can be . . . rather hectic. I guess that's the word for it."

His eyebrows went up with curiosity and she was a little embarrassed. After all, it was her mother's house, as well as Wolff's.

"That your dog?" The waitress had arrived.

Nita was sitting as close as possible to Gail.

"Is it all right?" Gail asked.

"Just keep her on the floor. Some folks want 'em at the table."

"She'll stay down," Gail reassured the girl.

"May we have a menu, please?" Ben asked.

"No menu at noontime," the waitress blithely announced. "Just sandwiches." She pronounced them sanichs. "And specialty of day chowder. Fish."

They looked at each other.

"How about settling for chowder?" Ben asked, and Gail agreed.

"Would you like a drink first?"

"No bar till five o'clock," the waitress said quickly.

"That settles that. Just two chowders, then, and a child's portion for the dog?"

The waitress wrote it down and disappeared.

"I take it you've never eaten here before," Ben said after awhile.

Gail shook her head. "I've never been in this town until day before yesterday."

"No?" Again his eyebrows went up in curiosity, so she had to explain.

"My mother's only been married to Wolff for less than a year, and most of that time they've been traveling. On business, of course."

"Of course. Then you don't know your stepfather very well."

She shook her head. She didn't want to talk about her feelings about Wolff with someone she scarcely knew, so she quickly changed the subject.

"You're a funny one for a writer."

"Why?"

"Most writers want to talk about their work."

He shrugged. "It's not . . . that interesting."

The chowder had arrived, already. Big bowls of very attractive chowder. Big chunks of fish, not too many potatoes, and a very thick sauce.

He switched the subject back to her.

"Have you always lived in New York?"

"Oh, no. We moved there about . . . let's see . . . three years ago. After my father died."

"From where did you move?"

"Nosey, aren't you?" But Gail smiled. "Dayton, Ohio. My father was in the Air Force."

"Oh."

"He was killed—on a special trip to Vietnam," Gail said hastily.

"I'm sorry."

"What about you," she said quickly. "Where did you come from?"

"I didn't come from anywhere," he explained. "I am that rare bird, a native New Yorker. I was born there. I'm also rare in that, as I told you, I live with my family. My father's a doctor, my

brother's still in high school. Now, what about you, do you 'go to business' as they say in Fun City?"

Gail nodded. "In an art gallery."

"Like it?"

"Oh, yes. It's rather frustrating, in a way, because I was going to be an artist. I even studied it, instead of going to college. But having concluded I'm only an amateur, I got myself a job."

"But you still paint."

"Oh, yes. Occasionally."

"I'd like to see your work."

She thought of her easel and her stack of paintings. They were stored everywhere in that tiny apartment, under beds, in closets. She wondered, would he call her? Would he come to the apartment, that crazy apartment, crowded with souvenirs from Air Force assignments in Africa, Europe, Japan?

"It's not all that much. I don't like to talk about it, no more than you want to talk about your writing. By the way, how did you get into journalism?"

"What?" He looked startled. Then he shrugged. "It just happened. How did you get into art?"

"They gave me crayons when I was a little girl."

They finished their chowders in silence. Until Ben said, "You know, I've been wondering what that fellow meant. The one we met outside. About cars at night. Are there that many parties?"

Gail shook her head. "It doesn't seem likely. My mother talks about leading a quiet life. There was no party last night, but there were cars. Wolff does keep odd office hours and must do a lot of business at night."

"Hmm," was all Ben said.

Near the cash register, as they were leaving, a rack of postcards caught Gail's eye. "One of these I have to have." She reached for her purse.

"What's that?"

"Belling Falls. It's not a very good photograph, but it will help me to remember. I'm going to paint it—from memory."

"That's the local scenic spot?"

Gail nodded.

"I'd like to see the falls. Are they far?"

"Not very."

"Hard to find?"

"Nope. Lots of signs."

"I take it you saw them yesterday—you did say it was your first visit here. You don't mind going again?"

"Oh, no! The falls are beautiful."

Somehow it was much more fun today, riding along that little back road that looped over the hills and slid down into the valleys, past the pseudo-Italian restaurant and across the little bridge to the point where the snowy blue water of Belling Falls suddenly burst into view.

They got out of the car and walked closer, as close as they could to the falls. Ben was silent for a long while. The only sounds were the wind in the red and yellow trees and the roaring water.

"I was going to say I wish I'd brought my camera," Ben said at last. "But now I don't think a photograph would do the falls justice. I'll wait for your painting."

"My painting may not do them justice, either." Gail was thinking aloud. "It's not just what you see here, it's the way the place makes you feel. If you know what I mean."

"I think I do."

Suddenly, as they stood there, almost mesmerized, the wind blew an enormous black cloud across the sky. The trees quivered. Lightning zigzagged across the now gray sky, and the thunder boomed.

They turned and ran toward the car.

The rain had started before they reached it. Ben struggled to put up the top with no luck.

"People who say they like to walk in the rain are nuts," Ben growled.

"Nuts!" Gail echoed.

"It's not romantic. It's just damned uncomfortable." But he was grinning.

The road was slippery now and Ben was forced not only to drive slowly, but to concentrate on his driving. It seemed to take forever before they reached the village.

"If this keeps up," Ben said, "driving back to New York will be no picnic. However, I intend to get that top up—or bust."

"You're going back to New York right away?" Gail asked. "But you said you hadn't finished your interview!"

"No, I haven't. And I don't think I'd like to do it . . . by correspondence. I can always hole up at Ye Inn."

They finally reached the corner where they turned off for the Sorensons. The house itself at this point was only a dark blob against the sky, visible only when flashes of lightning illuminated it.

Just as they turned, the car skidded, groaned backward to a stop.

"This is all we need," Ben said, "to get stuck in the mud. Well, I'll look for a log or a rock or something . . ."

"I'll help. No point in sitting still and drowning!" Gail laughed.

They stood for a moment in the pelting rain and the churned-up mud, studying the back wheels.

They were close to the river now, and behind the car there was nothing but mud down to the water's edge.

Gail spotted an old fence, near the river. She took off her shoes and tossed them into the car and started toward the fence. Ben hurried after her.

"Will one of these do?" She pointed at the rotting fence.

"If we can get the wood loose . . ."

They each tugged at opposite ends of one of the pieces, finally had to drag it back, including a lot of rusty wire. Nita barked wildly at their heels.

Together they shoved the tangle of wire and wood under the wheels.

"That ought to do. If it holds," Ben said.

"You start the car. I'll watch it," Gail told him. "Be careful."

It seemed to take forever. The wheels turned futilely, spraying mud over Gail from head to toe, before finally the tires bit into the wire and then into the wood.

"I'm going to ruin your car," Gail told him, before she got inside. "Look at me!"

"Never mind the car." He grinned. "Come on in! We've got to get you home and dried out."

"We both have to get dried out."

"You're wetter than I am."

"I'm muddier!"

The thunder and lightning were fading away but the wind and the rain were still with them.

They were surprised to see the gate was standing open. Ben drove as close as possible to the steps.

"Home at last." He turned off the engine. "At least you are. I've got to get that top up."

Gail was struggling into her shoes.

"Oh, come in and dry out first! And maybe the rain will stop."

"I don't think Mr. Sorenson will be too happy to see me turn up again, so soon."

"Look!" Gail pointed. "The other cars are gone. There's only mine."

Ben smiled, patted the shivering Nita. "We're a sorry trio," he said. "I guess I'd better dry out ere I catch pneumonia."

They got out of the car and hurried up the steps, shaking water as they moved.

Gail pushed the button and the bells tinkled. But there was no other sound, not even from Champ. They waited, shivering, wondering if everybody had left the house, even Marylou. Gail was about to give up and go around to the back door when she heard soft footsteps and then Carolyn's little voice, asking, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Mother! Please open the door."

Slowly the door swung.

Carolyn stared at Gail, and then at Ben, curiously.

Nita slipped inside.

"Mother, this is Ben Haynes."

Before she acknowledged the introduction, Carolyn burst into tears.

"They're gone. They're all gone. Marylou's mother got sick and then Wolff and Donald took Champ and went off hours ago and God knows where and I'm all alone!"

Chapter 7

Gail patted her mother's shoulder. "Come on, Mother, it's all right. Nothing to get excited about. You're used to being alone a lot, aren't you?"

Carolyn shook her head. "Not like this. They even took Champ. He at least always made me feel safe."

"Well, we're here now," Gail said practically, "mud and all."

Carolyn brushed the tears out of her eyes, smoothed her silky hair. "Yes, yes, of course." She looked directly at her daughter for the first time. "Good lord, what happened to you?"

"We had a little trouble with the car. Mother, I'm going up and change, do you suppose you

could find a towel . . . or towels for Ben and Nita?"

"Of course, of course." She was looking at Ben now. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name . . ."

"Ben Haynes." He shook hands with her. "Sorry about the wetness."

"Oh, my goodness, you are wet. You need a dry shirt, or something. Wait. Wait right here. I mean right in there . . ." She pointed to the living room. "By the fire."

She followed Gail up the stairs.

Gail took the world's fastest shower to get rid of the mud, put on fresh white blouse and her favorite black wool slacks, tied back her still-wet hair.

When she got back to the living room she found Ben, wearing a huge baggy sweater that undoubtedly belonged to Wolff, sitting in front of the fire, drink in hand. Carolyn was at the bar, stirring the martini pitcher.

"I'll have a martini myself," Gail said. "No daiquiri tonight, Mother."

"Whatever you say, dear."

Gail sat down on the floor, close to the fire, sipped the martini as if it were medicine. Nita, curled up beside her, thumped her tail.

"I've finally stopped shivering," Ben said. "I think I'll live."

Carolyn sat down not far away. She smiled at Ben.

"Now, young man, tell me, where did you come from, out of the blue?"

"He came to interview Wolff for a magazine."

Carolyn turned to Gail. "Oh? In your note you said you were going out to lunch with a friend."

"I think I am a friend of your daughter's. As of today." Ben glanced at Gail, tentatively, and she reassured him with a grin.

"My husband must have been terribly pleased. I mean, it is such a compliment . . ." Carolyn broke off because of the way Ben was looking at her.

Ben did not speak for a moment. He glanced down at the borrowed sweater, the sweater that belonged to Wolff, and after a bit he said, "I'm afraid your husband was not complimented. He seemed rather to resent my questions. It became a difficult interview."

"I'm sorry! Perhaps Wolff wasn't feeling well. He . . ."

Ben sat up a little straighter. "You mean . . . it was just a mood? You mean, if I tried again, he might be more affable? After all, it will be good publicity."

"I know. Perhaps when he comes back tonight. . . ." But her voice did not have the ring of certainty.

They had been cozy there by the fire until Wolff's name came into the conversation.

"Maybe you can help me, Mrs. Sorenson. Some-

times the so-called silent partner is in a better position to describe a business. As an observer . . ."

"I know nothing about his business. Nothing!" Carolyn's protest was vehement.

"But, Mother," Gail reminded her, "you do travel with him."

"I've met some people, true, I mean when we visit a city the exporters he's doing business with will entertain us but it's purely social, there's never any shop talk. No, I know nothing. Nothing."

"I see." Ben looked down into his drink.

"Are you going to talk to him again?" Gail leaned forward.

"Yes, I am. And if I have no better luck then I shall have to do what any reporter does."

"What's that?"

His gray eyes were bright. "Make it up," he said. "Imagine what it must be like to be an importer of fine foods."

"Is that ethical?" Gail's eyes widened. She got up and went over to the bar and poured herself another martini. "Is it honest?"

"If I did it in a nice way."

"I just don't think it's right," Gail said slowly.

"Neither do I!" Carolyn added.

"Sorry, ladies," Ben apologized. "I promise not to fabricate. Instead I'll come again."

He had gotten to his feet.

"Why don't you wait until Wolff comes back?" Gail asked him.

He looked at Carolyn. "I hate to impose any more on your hospitality."

"That's quite all right. Do wait. Besides, in this weather you shouldn't start driving."

It was not clear whether Carolyn really liked him, or if she were placating him.

"You have no idea how long they'll be?"

Carolyn shook her head. "I told you. It's true. I do not know anything about Wolff's business."

Ben looked at his watch. "I'll wait awhile."

Carolyn had stood up.

"Please help yourself at the bar. I'm going out and see what goodies are on hand for another informal buffet."

"The informal buffets around here are something," Gail told Ben. "I hope you can stay."

"Yes," said Carolyn nervously. "Yes, indeed. Well, excuse me." She scurried out of the room.

Both Gail and Ben were silent after Carolyn left. Ben looked thoughtful and Gail was thoughtful, about him, and his threat to make up a story if Wolff would not cooperate. She wondered: was the reporter Ben Haynes as pleasant a person as the social Ben Haynes?

It was some time later that she realized that Nita was no longer there by the fire.

"I better see where the dog's got to." She stood up. "I don't like her getting the wanderlust in somebody else's house. Besides, she has a penchant for the office, which Wolff doesn't like."

"Oh? Probably the food. I noticed it when I was up there this morning. You can practically smell the countries . . . Spain oily and fishy and spicy and France all garlic and cheese."

Gail nodded. "I know. The place intrigues me. But Wolff is very fussy about his office. He doesn't want anyone poking around there, not even a dog. I better check."

She went out into the hall, calling to Nita. No response. Maybe she'd gone off to bed. Sometimes Nita did that . . . Perhaps she had nothing to worry about. Surely Wolff would have locked his office door before he went out.

But the door stood ajar.

The shades had been closed and the office was almost dark in the late afternoon.

"Nita?"

Gail found the light switch, stepped into the center of the room.

"Nita!"

Sure enough, behind the cabinet in the corner where that other door was, Nita had her nose to the floor, sniffing.

"Nita, you naughty dog, come here!"

Nita did not obey.

Gail went over and took her by her collar. "Come on, now, you know you shouldn't be in here. Come on."

She was dragging the dog across the office when

she looked up and saw Ben standing in the doorway.

"I tagged along." He smiled. "I'm curious, too."

He began walking up and down in front of the shelves with the samples while Gail watched.

Once he said, "Nita, old girl, I think you'd be more apt to get handouts in the kitchen than here!"

"What really intrigues her," Gail said, "is something behind that door in the corner."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I don't know."

"Well, as long as we're here, let's see." He strode across the room to the door. "Locked," he said.

"I think we'd better get out of here."

Ben had come back beside her. "I guess you're right. But I've made up my mind about one thing."

"Oh?"

"I'm staying here until he gets home. I'm going to be sweet as pie. I'm going to *make* him talk."

Downstairs the front door slammed.

"Good lord, he's back already!" Gail exclaimed.

They hurried out of the office, barely getting the door shut before Champ dashed up the stairs.

He stood by the office door, growling a warning.

"Me in his sweater," Ben mumbled. "He'll love that."

As they started down, they saw Wolff come out of the living room and look up. His face was deadpan.

"Hello . . . again," Wolff said when the two of them had reached the ground floor.

Ben spoke quickly. "I hope you don't mind my hanging around. Gail . . ." He looked at her as if asking permission to call her by her first name. ". . . and I got caught in the storm this afternoon. Mrs. Sorenson was kind enough to . . ." he touched the sweater ". . . to loan me this until my own things are dry."

"I see." Wolff's tone was cautious.

"I'll find out where Mrs. Sorenson put my own sweater and see if it's dry."

"Come in and have a drink first." Wolff sounded surprisingly cordial.

Carolyn was back in the living room.

A new round was poured and then Wolff said, "No hors d'oeuvres, darling?"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Carolyn jumped to her feet. "You see, Marylou had to go home, her mother's ill, and I just forgot."

"Another night off? I don't believe that sick mother routine for a minute. But it's okay. Never mind. I'll go dig up something."

"I do have dinner organized," Carolyn said quickly.

"Fine."

After he had left the room Carolyn said, "He's

worried about something, poor dear, I can tell, and then to come home to everything disorganized. Wolff doesn't like to be disorganized."

He may have been worried but he was much pleasanter than ever before. He came back with Greek olives, miniature pickled ears of corn from Germany, Caspian caviar, among many other things.

"Isn't it strange," Ben said, "how Americans want everything so big, from automobiles down to olives? These little wrinkled fellows are so much better than the California giants."

This should have been a compliment, to an importer, but Wolff only shrugged. "I just happen to have a recent shipment of these from Greece. Personally, I prefer the California variety. More for your money!"

"More olive but less flavor!" Gail popped another into her mouth.

Wolff said nothing but his expression was unpleasant, and Gail's mother was frowning at Gail. A warning: don't argue with your stepfather! Don't cross him. Ben had said he was going to be sweet as pie, in order to get his interview. She was no help. Still, there was something about Wolff's manner that provoked Gail to impudence. And besides that, she did prefer the Greek olives!

"Perhaps," Ben said quickly, "it's just the idea. What do you think, Mr. Sorenson?"

"The idea?"

"The romantic *idea* of an import that sells them. Sells anything."

Wolff smiled. It was the first really honest smile Gail had seen on his face this evening. Ben had pleased him, at last.

"You're absolutely right, my boy. Absolutely. There are some outfits that just stamp *imported* on anything. Just the word *imported* and the stupid public will buy."

It was fascinating to watch Ben, sitting there drinking Wolff's liquor and eating Wolff's food and flattering him so outrageously, agreeing with him so wholeheartedly, that Wolff, mellowing with his bourbons, was cooperating beautifully.

He talked of the dealer he had met on a little Greek island, of how the miniature pickled ears of corn were grown and prepared, of the prowling he had had to do early in his career in native markets.

"I used to be strictly a steak and french fries man, until I got into this racket," Wolff said.

"You didn't start out as an epicure, then?" Ben asked.

"Nope. A job was a job and I took it with a little outfit. Worked like the devil. Finally bought them out, made it my own . . ."

Gail could imagine the story that was forming in Ben's head. It could be a good one, the old self-made-man story, with a twist.

Wolff got up and wobbled to the bar and

refilled his glass. "Anybody else ready?" he asked.

Nobody was.

"This is about enough for me," Wolff went on. "I think it's high time we ate. Will you stay for dinner, Haynes?"

"I hate to put you to all that trouble," Ben demurred.

"No trouble at all. Electric can opener does most of the work. No trouble at all to whip up smorgasbord." He downed his drink, moved closer to the door.

Ben got up. "Can I help?"

"No, you two young people stay here and be cozy. Carolyn and I shall fix our little picnic, shan't we, my dear?"

Carolyn got up quickly. "Yes, yes, of course."

Ben and Gail looked at each other after the couple had left.

Gail lifted her glass in a mock toast.

"You're getting your interview, aren't you, you rat. Putting words in his mouth."

Ben's sharp eyes were dancing.

"I'm winning his confidence, I guess," he said softly.

"The first step."

"It's the first step in anything." He hesitated. "For example, I'd like to win yours."

"Oh? So soon?"

"So soon. I know, I know, we only met for the first time about ten o'clock this morning. But somehow, I feel as if I'd known you longer."

"People who go through storms together?"

"Perhaps." He reached in his pocket and brought out a little notebook and pencil.

"I wondered when you were going to start making notes."

"Not notes." He held the notebook and pencil toward her. "Your phone number."

The first step in gaining her confidence? She liked the way he was looking at her with those direct, bright eyes. A phone number. She remembered when she first met Bruce. At one of her mother's cocktail parties and he had wisecracked about telephone numbers. "I know where you live," he had said. "I'll just pop in." She had thought it charming, then; she had seen him as a dashing Robin Hood unpredictable sort of person, but later that nonchalance had disillusioned her. She much preferred young men to call first.

She took the notebook and pencil and wrote her name and number.

"If I never finish my interview," Ben was looking at the notebook instead of at her, "the day isn't lost. I met you."

Wolff was in the doorway.

"Can you kids help get everything on the table?"

Dinner was a pleasant affair. The fantastic menu—beef sukiyaki, seafood paella, a Swiss stew called *ratatouille,* excellent wine—dominated and directed the conversation.

"I always wonder when I eat oriental foods," Carolyn said, "exactly what goes into the various dishes. I wondered all the time we were in the Orient. At any rate, they are delicious."

"They are," Ben agreed. "You know what I've wondered, sometimes, about foods from the Orient—what about drugs? They're so plentiful over there. Do you suppose they might slip something into a sukiyaki, to which one could become addicted?"

"I doubt it very much," Wolff said quickly and firmly.

"What a dreadful thought!" Carolyn exclaimed. "I think the whole subject of drugs is so depressing. Thank goodness, when Gail was a teenager it wasn't quite the same."

"There were those," Gail said. "But not me."

"Terrible." Wolff shook his head. "Terrible times."

When dessert came it was a flaky puffy pastry full of honey and cashews.

"Baclava, Baclava, how I love thee!" was Ben's comment.

Obviously all that food had sobered Wolff a great deal. He was much less talkative. Now and

then he glanced at Ben, as if he were wondering if he had talked too much. The interview seemed to be over and Ben should leave. She realized she would miss him, that he had been the best part of this weekend.

But he had her phone number.

After dinner they went back in the living room and Wolff passed out brandies.

Ben took his and walked over toward the window. He pulled back the lace curtain and looked out. He stood there for a long time, as if he were thinking, as if he wanted, in that moment, to be alone.

"Is it still raining?" Gail asked him.

He did not answer.

She called out, a little louder, "Ben! Has the rain stopped?"

He whirled around.

"No, it's still pouring. Although it's hard to see anything out in all that blackness."

"This is a lonely spot," Carolyn said quietly. "That was why I felt so . . . alone this afternoon, when everybody left, and then there was the storm."

She was speaking to her husband but he did not look up, it was as if he were far away in his thoughts, as Ben had been a moment before.

"I guess I better get ready for a long, wet drive." Ben looked at Gail.

She remembered mention of the inn, but she said, "That's going to be an awful drive."

Carolyn looked up. "Couldn't you spend the night?" She turned to Wolff. "There's that room on the fourth floor, dear."

Wolff nodded absently. "The attic," he said.

"Oh, darling, don't call it an attic!" Carolyn protested. "Call it the fourth floor. It sounds so much nicer."

"The fourth floor for the fourth estate?" Wolff answered.

"The only real inconvenience is that there's no bathroom up there, but there is a guest bathroom on the third floor, right off the hall."

"I don't want to impose any more," Ben said. He looked at Wolff, quite aware, as they all were, of his reluctance.

"You're welcome to stay," Wolff said shortly, without a hint of welcome in his voice.

At that moment the telephone began to ring. It was the first time since late last night, Gail realized. Wolff lumbered to his feet and hurried out into the hall. He spoke in too low a tone for anyone to hear anything he was saying, but in a moment he was back in the doorway.

"That was Donald," he said to his wife.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Sorry, I've got to go out!"

"Must you, dear? This late? In all that rain?"

"You're not alone," he said coldly, and turned away.

His serious tone wiped out what remained of the pleasant evening mood.

Chapter 8

Almost immediately after Wolff left, Carolyn suggested they go to bed. She looked genuinely tired, and under a strain, ready to stop playing hostess.

From her room Gail could hear Carolyn and Ben above her, as she showed him to his room. It was a funny contrast between Carolyn's feathery little steps, like a bird on a roof, and Ben's positive ones. The walk was peculiarly Ben: direct, firm. Gail was sure that she would be able to recognize it again, to distinguish it from anybody else's.

In fact, she felt as he had said he did, as if she

had known him for a longer time than just the past few hours.

After a bit she heard Carolyn coming down, then a tap on the door.

"Gail, are you still awake?"

"Sure!" She hadn't even started to undress. She went over and opened the door.

"May I come in for a minute?"

"Of course."

Carolyn glanced about the room.

"You're comfortable here?"

"Very, Mother. What is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just . . . Gail, would you mind terribly leaving your door ajar? It would make me feel . . . safer."

"All right. At least until it's time for Nita's last run. After that I'd better shut her in. She keeps heading for the office, you know."

Carolyn nodded. "I know." She frowned. "I hope you sleep better tonight, dear."

"I think I will." Then, to change the subject, to try to get the frown from Carolyn's face, she said, "What do you think of your newest house guest?"

"Who? What?" Carolyn said absently.

"Ben Haynes." Then she added, "I like him."

Ordinarily this would have inspired her mother to a lot of conversation but tonight all she said was, "Oh, yes, of course. He's very pleasant." Then turned as if she were about to leave the room.

"I hope *you* sleep well, Mother. You look tired."

"I am. But I'm not sleepy. I guess I'll have to take one of my pills."

"Oh, Mother, you're not back on them!" After Gail's father's death her mother had taken so many pills so many nights that Gail had been terribly worried. But finally Carolyn had stopped.

"Oh, not like before!" Carolyn insisted. "These pills are different. Wolff gets them for me. He says they're quite harmless and he much prefers my taking one to my waking him in the middle of the night with one of my screaming nightmares. He likes his rest. He needs it."

Then why doesn't he take the pills? Gail thought. But she said nothing. She didn't want to upset her mother any further this evening.

The first thing Gail discovered after her mother had left was that there was nothing to read in the room. She had not thought about it on the previous two nights, she had been ready for sleep. But tonight she was wide-eyed.

Then she remembered the library. Mother had said there was nothing worth reading, but Carolyn's tastes and hers were not always alike. She would wait a bit, give her mother a chance to get into bed. Then she would take Nita down for her last run and give the library a try.

The wind was slamming the rain against her

window. The only other sound was that of Ben's footsteps, overhead. Evidently he was not ready for bed, either.

She smoked one more cigarette, to kill time, then tiptoed across to the door to her mother's room. The door was ajar but the light was out. She tiptoed across to the dimly lit stairs, held onto the banister on her way down.

The second floor was in darkness, the only light by which she could find her way was the small wall one on the first floor.

First she let Nita outside for a very brief run. She was back in a flash, shaking the rain from her fur.

Gail walked back and opened the door to the library, fumbled on either side of the doorway until she found a switch.

Her first impression was that this was no longer a library, but a store room. There were old trunks and boxes and some books piled helter skelter on the shelves.

As she might have expected, there were several books on gardening. But the others were a real surprise. They were classics, well bound—Shakespeare and all the poets, and Kafka and Proust and so on. She had never expected that the first Mrs. Sorenson would have been an intellectual, it was hard to conceive of Wolff married to such a person. The other puzzling thing was that these books should still be here. A person who would

own such books certainly would not have abandoned them. She looked at the books for quite awhile, trying to decide what would be best, settling on the slim volume of E. B. White's *This is New York*.

She climbed the dark stairs, slowly as she had come down.

Just as she reached the third floor Ben appeared, coming down from the fourth. She pointed at the door to her mother's room and put her finger to her lips.

He nodded, pointing downstairs, then lifted an imaginary glass to his lips, an eloquent invitation for a nightcap.

Why not?

The fire in the fireplace had died down to a few coals, but the room was still warm.

Ben closed the sliding doors.

"You couldn't sleep either?" he asked.

"Nope. I didn't even try. I came down and found a book. In the so-called library."

He tilted his head to look at the tile. "Homesick?"

She laughed.

Ben said, "Do you suppose the old man—I shouldn't call him that, should I? I mean our host—would mind if we had a nightcap?"

"I don't think he would."

"Brandy again?"

Gail nodded.

When they sat down in front of the fire, glasses in hand, Ben said, "It's rather nice talking to you —alone. Not that your mother isn't a sweetie-pie."

"That's a good description," Gail said softly. Then she frowned. "I'm worried about her."

"Oh?"

"She was on a sleeping pill kick, after my father was killed. I thought she was all over it, but it seems she's started taking them again."

"That's too bad."

"I know. But you know how it is with parents. You can't advise them."

"Generation gap."

"I guess that's it. A wall you can never knock down. But I do wish she would tell me what's bothering her, now, why she takes those pills. Something's troubling her, I know. She acts as if she were afraid of something."

Ben sat forward. "Or someone?"

Gail thought a moment. A shiver ran up her spine.

"Someone," she admitted.

"What about your stepfather?" Ben went on. "What kind of a man is he, really? Please don't think I'm prying. I'm just curious. He's a bit of an enigma."

"To be honest, I must say he affects me in strange ways. I want to talk back to him. I have the urge to disagree with him. And that office of

his that he's so particular about. It just makes me want to be a snoop!"

"I know what you mean," Ben said quietly. "I feel somewhat the same way myself."

"But . . ." Gail turned her head, slightly embarrassed, to be talking this way with someone she scarcely knew. "He is my mother's husband. She loves him and trusts him—so I've got to mind my manners."

Ben put down his brandy glass and concentrated on lighting his pipe for a few moments. Then, with a touch of a smile, he appeared to be changing the subject.

"I meant it, Gail, when I said that it hardly seems as if we only met this morning. I feel as if I'd known you for a much longer time."

She nodded. "So do I. About knowing you, I mean."

"So I've a confession to make."

"Oh?" She sat up straighter and stared at him.

Ben turned his glass around and around on the table, looked down into it.

"I'm not a magazine writer. There isn't even a magazine called *Food*—that I know of."

His eyes were questioning her now. Of course he was wondering if he had shocked her, if by his confession he had destroyed any possibility of confidence. But she was not half so shocked as she was curious.

"Go on!" She leaned forward.

"I am a writer." He smiled. "But not for a magazine. An advertising agency. Just a p.r. man."

"I see." Gail smiled back. "And you want Wolff to hire your agency."

"Nope."

Now she really was puzzled. "Then why . . ."

"Why am I here? Well, this is the difficult part. After all, Sorenson is your stepfather. And he has been a kind host, once we met outside of his office."

"But I've already told you how I feel about him. I can't honestly say I like him very much."

"Nor do I." Ben stood up and began pacing around. "Despite all my camaraderie this evening."

He went over and poked at the dying fire; he walked back to the window and again pushed back the curtain and peered out, as he had earlier that evening. She caught a glimpse of the rain beating against the pane. Finally he turned around.

"I suppose I should begin at the beginning. With some of my life story. Hope I won't bore you."

"Of course not!"

"Well, as I told you, I have a younger brother. Quite a bit younger. Seventeen, to be exact. The baby of the family and a little spoiled. I grew up with the admonition, 'Take care of your little

brother.' I never really minded, until lately. Freddie . . . my folks still call him Freddie, for lord's sake . . . now considers himself an adult and resents any admonitions. There's not only a generation gap in our family but a brother to brother gap that's enormous. I try to tell myself to leave him alone to go his own way. On the other hand, the old habit of taking care of him is strong. Besides . . ."

Ben went back to his brandy glass, drained it, put it back on the bar.

"I guess I've had enough of that stuff for one night." He paused, then he went on. "Freddie, of course, thinks I'm the squarest of the square." He grinned. "Growing sideburns didn't help a bit. No matter how I've tried for togetherness or brotherly love or any sort of meeting ground has done no good. I'm still the establishment."

"You're not square to me," Gail said softly.

"Thank you." He almost smiled. "You know, I'd stop playing the big brother act. I really would. But I can't. Not yet. The trouble, you see, is . . . drugs."

"Oh, no!"

"Yes. And, as I told you, my father is a doctor and he's tried everything under the sun with Freddie, I mean tried to *help*. He's been understanding and patient as he can be. And Freddie has sworn he would stop, several times. At first he was only on pot and that wasn't so bad. But later he tried her-

oin. He had an adolescent love affair and the girl —a great kid—gave up finally, because of his addiction, and ditched him. That only made it worse. Again he swore he was off the stuff. Even when he came home with those telltale black and blue marks on his arm, he'd swear it was an 'old one.' Then a lot of his clothes, good clothes, would just be lost. He'd hocked them, of course. There would be the bad days, and nights, when we could hear him thrashing about in his bedroom.

"Somehow he kept going, always assuring Dad he hadn't really got the habit. After all, he wasn't stealing . . .

"Then the grades in school started going down. That really got to Dad. He'd had high hopes for Freddie—who is a bright kid—going into medicine. As long as stupid Ben flunked Latin and hadn't a prayer and hated medicine, anyway . . ."

"Come on, now," Gail said. "No self deprecation."

"I have been rattling on, haven't I, with my life story?"

"It's all right. It's interesting."

It was. The more she listened the more she realized that there was a lot more to this young man than he had appeared earlier in the day. That casual, friendly companion had serious depths.

"Well, I guess I was a bit longwinded because I

wanted you to have the full picture. I wanted you to understand the real reason I am here."

"I see." She did not, really.

"Having concluded that trying to be chummy, trying to be close, was getting me nowhere, I decided to pretend indifference to my brother, but on the side to . . . well, investigate. I became a real snoop. Listening in on the extension telephone, picking up names of people and places and tracking them down. It was pretty futile for a long while. Addicts are damned careful.

"Finally when he was away for a weekend I did the sneakiest trick of all. I searched his room. Nothing much turned up at first. Just the usual junk a seventeen year old has stashed away in no particular order. At last I found something that intrigued me. A tin of imported English biscuits. That seemed out of character. And when I opened the tin there weren't any biscuits, not even a crumb. Nothing but a telltale odor. And . . ." he paused, "on the bottom of the box a sticker that read: 'Sorenson's Imports.' "

Chapter 9

"Oh, no!" Gail exclaimed. "But . . ."

"I know. I thought the same thing myself at first. That he merely had been storing the stuff in that box. Then two ideas occurred to me. First off, my brother is not in the habit of buying food on his own and keeping it in his room. Certainly not foreign foods. And secondly, my folks don't buy such things, either. They are from the midwest, strictly hashed browns, corn on the cob, steak or chops folk.

"Of course there was no use asking Freddie about it. Not only do we not communicate, but ever since he went on drugs he has been alternately irritable or kind of giddy-gay sarcastic.

"I thought about it for several days and then I looked up Sorenson's Imports in the yellow pages. Wholesale, only, with an address for a warehouse. I decided to check it out at Zabar's."

"Zabar's?" Gail puzzled.

"You don't know Zabar's? It's on the West Side, just above 79th Street. The world's super-delicatessen. Foods and pots and pans and God knows what all from all over the world. Fascinating place. You should go browse there some time. The odors are twice as exciting as the ones here in the office. At first I just started poking around, looking at labels, and when a clerk asked to help me I asked him about Sorenson's Imports."

"And?"

"Clean bill of goods. I was assured that Sorenson's was an established and reliable outfit. That didn't stop my curiosity, however. I made a test case. I found the same sort of tin of biscuits there at Zabar's, and I bought it. When Freddie made one of his rare appearances for dinner, I brought out the biscuits at cocktail time, casually offered it to my mother as something I'd picked up on my lunch hour. No mention of Zabar's, natch, as my office is miles from there.

"Mother and Dad were surprised, a little, but pleased, and Mother whisked out some cheddar cheese. But what I was watching was Freddie's face. He's pretty good at covering up, of course, but there was one moment, a flash of a moment,

when he first saw the box. We had just opened it and were serving ourselves instead of putting the biscuits on a plate. I saw Freddie's eyebrows go up, the way they always do when he is startled. I may not know my brother very well right now, but some things—like facial expressions—don't change.

"I decided to investigate Sorenson's further. So one afternoon when I had the time I wandered down to the lower East Side and that warehouse. Like most wholesale places it was not too prepossessing, but I had anticipated that—old buildings with lackadaisical help and slow service.

"I got the brush-off as someone of little importance, although I had lied like a trouper about opening a small delicatessen soon.

"About all I could get my hands on that day was a printed list of goods and prices. It seems any orders I might want to place would be through the mail. I was not to think I could go to the warehouse and pick them up, however more convenient that would be. The only address was a p.o. box number.

"Of course I went back again. I made myself out to be a rather stupid, old-fashioned character who wanted not only to look over the goods before ordering, but that really I would prefer to do business with Mr. Sorenson himself. I even went so far as to say that I had met him years ago and considered myself almost a friend."

Ben paused. "Why are you looking at me, like that?"

"I was just thinking," Gail said, "what a marvelous act you put on."

"I guess there's a bit of ham in me. It comes in handy sometimes. Even for a p.r. man."

"Go on," Gail told him. "How did you learn about the office being here?"

"Well, finally one day on one of my trips to the warehouse I struck up an acquaintance with one of the workmen. He was an odd little shrimp of a man, at first decidedly cool and offhand. But in my role of potential small delicatessen owner I had developed some homey touches. I kept feeling him out on various subjects such as politics, cost of living, baseball. Baseball rang the bell. He was a fan, and for that conversation I became a great fan. We also agreed that women were for the birds, Nixon was wonderful, and Mayor Lindsay should go."

Gail's eyes widened with surprise but he reassured her with a wink.

"And so," she asked, "what happened?"

"Well, he began to think I was a good kid. Or maybe he began to get scared. I won't go into all the conversations we had, but finally he said, 'Okay, okay, you go see the old man. Sorenson's home, and office are up in Bellingburg.' So here I am."

Actor—detective—Ben Haynes continued to amaze her.

"When I first got up here today Sorenson's office did seem to be on the up and up. And yet, several things struck me. He is evasive; he does not care about publicity. Not to mention that locked gate, and his odd office hours. And that locked door off his office, which so intrigues your dog."

Gail leaned forward, her chin on her clenched fist, her elbow on the table beside her, thinking.

"The question, of course, is simple," Ben went on. "Does he or does he not peddle drugs on the side? Do you suppose your mother knows what's going on . . . if it is?"

"Oh, no, of course not!" Gail cried. "You heard her at dinner tonight on the subject of drugs . . ."

"I heard both of them," Ben said quietly.

"But my mother . . ." Again she broke off, thinking back to all of her mother's behavior this weekend. Right at the start she had been so nervous, so on the defensive about her new home and her new husband. And the way she had kissed good night, that first evening, clinging to her daughter like a frightened child.

Ben said, "Wolff was doing a good job of covering up. Or so I thought at dinner time. That was when I first noticed . . . the fright in your mother's eyes."

He was so sober, so concerned, that she felt a shiver of fear run up her back.

"I still don't think she knows," she said softly. "I mean, if it is true. I think all she knows is that something is going on."

They were both silent. Outside the wind howled in the trees, swirled around the old house like a vengeful demon, and the rain still hissed at the window.

Ben looked at his watch. "Do you know what I'd like to do, tonight, while he's away? Explore that office, looking for clues. There would be plenty of time to clear out, when we heard his car."

Gail sat up straight. "I'm coming with you!"

"Maybe you should stay out of this. It is a risky business."

"You just said we could hear his car. I'm as anxious about my mother . . . as you are about your brother!" She got to her feet.

Nita preceded them up the stairs.

The office door was closed but not locked. Inside it seemed to be an extremely tidy place. The shelves of food, the freezer, open for exploration, revealed no suspicious packages.

On the desk there was a photograph which Gail had not noticed before. Two fat little children, a boy and a girl. Wolff's, of course. What struck her most was the expression on both their faces: fear.

Just plain fear. It was not a studio portrait but an enlargement of a snapshot, all that seemed to be left of Wolff's former life, shut up here in his oh-so-private office.

Nita again had her nose at the bottom of that locked inner door.

They were tiptoeing about, so as not to risk wakening Gail's mother. In a voice scarcely above a whisper, Ben said, "I think that door's our answer. If we can find the key."

The first desk drawers they opened held nothing more suspicious than paper and envelopes, pencils, erasers, paper clips, etc. The last, a big one in the center, was thoroughly locked.

Now and then, between blasts of wind, they could hear a car growling along the highway. They would listen, holding their breaths, until the growl faded into the distance.

"I guess it's hopeless," Gail said.

"Let's go over the desktop again."

There were several piles of papers to whiffle through. Orders. Lists of items. A wheel-disc of telephone numbers, mostly of stores all over the country.

Half-hidden by the photograph of the children was an ornate brass paperweight of oriental design. Gail picked it up. Underneath was a pile of slips of papers, clipped together.

"What do you suppose these are?" she asked.

Ben pulled one of the papers free, then reached

over and switched on the desk lamp and held the paper close to the light.

"Interesting."

Gail came closer. The paper held seemingly nonsensical number sequences, now and then a dollar amount, a telephone number. No words.

"I think this might be it," Ben said. "He left in too much of a hurry to put these away."

"But what are they?"

"These numbers," he pointed. "I would guess they are all part of a code. Perhaps they could be interpreted by the right person."

"The right person? Who would that be?"

"The police. You see, lately I've been doing a lot of research on drugs and their distribution. This sort of thing is quite common. I'm sure enough to call the police, right now, and get them out here before Sorenson comes back."

"Will they come? This late, and on such a night?"

"At least I can try."

Papers in hand, Ben went to the phone. Again Gail held her breath. She was excited, too, but she was also a bit afraid. What if Ben weren't right? What if Wolff got there before the police did, and could explain everything when they did arrive? Or, worst of all, what if the police arrived with their noisy sirens and woke Carolyn, who would be frightened out of her wits?

She watched Ben, just standing there, the receiver to his ear.

"Damn," he said. "The phone's dead. It must be the storm." He replaced the receiver in its cradle.

Gail shivered. "I hate it when a phone goes dead. You feel so shut off from the world. Especially way out here . . ."

Ben began folding the papers, then tucked them in his pocket.

"We'd better get out of here, before he does come back."

He switched off the desk lamp.

Gail called softly to Nita, who did not take her nose from the door. Ben went over to the dog, bent down almost to the floor. Then he stood up, shaking his head. "It's certainly a different odor than the rest of his wares!"

Gail was by the door, her hand on the light switch.

"Ben, hurry!"

Ben took Nita by the collar and half dragged her across the office.

The moment he was beside her Gail turned off the light. They moved into the hall, Ben still holding onto the dog.

Thinking of Nita, Gail pulled the door shut.

"Ben, what are we going to do?" If there were drugs behind that locked door . . . people who deal in drugs are ruthless . . .

"Right now I'm going to bed. So should you. Before he gets back. It's terribly late and we're both bushed and we may have quite a day tomorrow."

"What if he comes back and misses those papers?"

"I doubt he'll do any office work tonight."

"But in the morning . . ."

"He sleeps late, doesn't he? As I recall, when I arrived at ten o'clock this morning . . ."

Gail nodded. "Both he and my mother sleep late."

"I won't. I'll be up at the crack of dawn. If the phone's still dead, I'll go straight to the police. With these." He touched his pocket.

"Oh, Ben, won't it be dangerous? Haven't you heard about these rings? Don't you know how powerful they are?"

"I know." He put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his quick, bright eyes, serious now.

"Gail, my dear, it's you I'm worried about. Just being here in this place. I hate to go off, even to the police. Maybe you should come with me."

"There's my mother. I've got to look out for her."

"Of course."

They stood there in the shadowy hall, just looking at each other.

"This afternoon," he whispered, "long ago this afternoon when we were standing there at the falls

and you were so lovely with your dreamy eyes and your hair blowing in the wind . . . I wanted to kiss you."

"Oh?"

"I still want to."

She did not answer. He bent his face to hers and gave her a brush of a kiss. Then he took his hand from her shoulder.

"Good night, Gail!"

He turned and loped up the stairs.

Chapter 10

Over and over she told herself that she must sleep; she must be refreshed and ready for anything, come morning.

But the storm was intermittent now, which was all the more disturbing. Each time it started up again Gail was wide awake, and in spite of herself, listening for the sound of Wolff's car.

She was sure now that her reaction to her stepfather was grounded. Whether or not Ben's suspicion of the drug traffic was true, Wolff's ways indicated that he was a man of secrets. A dominant man, and she felt sure, a basically cruel one. Carolyn's deference to his wishes, Carolyn's obvious fright pointed to that. And then, that blown up

snapshot of those two children. She could imagine Wolff ordering them into position to take that picture . . . *hold still, damn it!*

Ben might think they were safe until morning but Gail could not help thinking that when Wolff came back he would go directly to his precious office, that he would remember those pieces of paper.

If they were important.

What if that odor from behind the locked door was something else? After all, Ben was no professional expert on either foods or drugs.

Ben. He was intriguing, attractive, different from anyone she ever had known.

Different. Watch out now, girl. This is somewhat the way you felt when Bruce came along. He, too, had been unpredictable.

How would it have gone if they had met under ordinary circumstances? Say, at a cocktail party. Or one of the openings at the gallery. Would she have picked Ben out of a crowd? Would he have picked her or would he, as most art gallery visitors, not notice an unobtrusive part of the help?

A public relations man. Not the type to gravitate toward the art circles of her world.

It did not matter. They had met. He had her phone number.

She did her best to concentrate on that, to try to think of New York City and her real life.

If everything went all right in the morning. If

Wolff did not discover what they were up to. If, if, if . . .

She slept, but fitfully, with many disjointed, frightening dreams, of climbing mountains, of falling, over and over again . . .

She opened her eyes to bright daylight and Nita scratching at the door.

First she ran to the window and raised the blind.

The storm was definitely over. The sun was shining on the still-wet red and yellow leaves of the trees and the muddy patchy grass of the lawn.

Mud! It was everywhere, water was still running down from the hills in a dozen rivulets.

Then she noticed. Only her car and Ben's roadster were in the yard.

Wolff had not come back.

She washed and dressed as quickly as she could. Her neatest pant suit, her most tailored blouse. If they were going to get involved with the police she must look ever so respectable.

Mother's door was still ajar. She peeked in. Carolyn was sleeping soundly. Those pills!

Gail hurried downstairs with Nita. This was the latest she had slept since she arrived. Of course they had been up late last night. Very late. Maybe Marylou would be there to fix breakfast. She decided to let Nita out the back door.

Marylou was not in the kitchen.

Today Gail discovered a little radio in a crowded corner of the kitchen counter. The reception was terrible; she could only get one station, full of scratches and buzzes. Now and then she could catch a phrase from the gravel-voiced announcer:

". . . worst flood in twenty-five years . . . fifteen inches rainfall . . . winds up to 60 miles per hour . . . bridge washed out at Belling Falls . . . all back roads hazardous . . . Belling River overflowing northwest of Bellingburg . . . three men drowned at Crawford Creek . . . half of county's telephone lines down . . ."

Gail put the kettle on to boil, poured Nita's milk and her juice.

No wonder Marylou was not here this morning. No wonder Wolff had not made it back. She thought of the little bridge by the falls and shuddered.

"Don't drive unless it is absolutely necessary," the radio man was warning. Yesterday, when the storm was in its infancy, the back roads had been bad enough. Ben's little sports car had had difficulty. Could he make it to the police station?

The kettle was boiling.

She was starting to spoon the instant coffee into her cup when the swinging door to the dining room was pushed open.

It was Ben.

At that moment Nita scratched to come in from the back door.

"Good morning, just a minute," Gail greeted Ben, then turned to open the door to a very muddy dog.

"Nita, hold!" She ran for a handful of paper towel and was busy wiping four paws.

"I heard the radio as I came downstairs," Ben said. "I hoped it would be you down here. I sort of wanted to see you before I took off."

"He's not back yet."

"I know. I'm taking off, fast. I overslept, somehow."

"The roads are terrible. I've been hearing all about it. The worst flood in twenty-five years. Are you sure you ought to drive?"

"I've got to. The phone's still dead. I tried it on the way down."

The kettle was whistling noisily now.

"Not even a fast cup of coffee?" Gail asked.

Ben sighed. "Okay, a fast cup of coffee."

She spooned the coffee into the second cup, reached for the kettle. "It's good they have instant around here, as long as you need a fast cup."

"I like instant best. Thanks." He took the cup.

"Cream? Sugar?"

"No thanks."

"I also like instant best. And I also like it black." Gail smiled. "Sit down."

He shook his head. "No time."

She remained standing, too, sipping her coffee. "Have you alerted your mother yet?"

Gail shook her head. "She's still asleep."

"You'd better wake her, tell her what's going on."

"It won't be easy," Gail said thoughtfully. "She'll be upset and more frightened than ever." She look down. "I must admit, I'm kind of scared myself."

"Of course you are! But the main thing to remember, and to impress on your mother, is not to let on that we suspect him, nor anything that I'm doing. Just keep your cool."

He finished his coffee with a gulp and put the cup on the counter.

"I shan't be any longer than I have to." He chucked her under the chin.

She said shakily, "Remember that old crack about, 'if the creeks don't rise'? Trouble is, they have risen. Be careful, Ben!"

She didn't want him to go; she couldn't bear the thought of facing Wolff, alone.

She put her cup beside his. "I'll see you out."

As they crossed the dining room they heard the car pull into the yard.

"Damn," Ben said under his breath. "I shouldn't have had that coffee. I could have been out of here."

He hurried toward the front door. Gail and Nita

followed. He opened the door and Nita dashed out to greet Champ, who was bounding into the house.

"You're up early," were Wolff's first words.

"I wanted to get an early start," Ben told him. "The roads must be pretty bad, according to the radio."

"Impossible," Wolff agreed. "I didn't know I'd be out all night. I tried to call, but the phone had gone dead. Is it all right now?"

"No," Ben said. "I just tried it." He went on quickly. "I'm glad I caught you." How beautifully Ben could lie! "I wanted to thank you for your hospitality."

"Don't mention it," Wolff said absently.

Ben turned to Gail, put out his hand. "Goodby, Gail. It was nice meeting you. See you again soon, I hope." He squeezed her hand.

"Sure," she answered, wondering if either he—or, worse yet, Wolff—were aware of how fast her heart was beating.

Ben had just finished shaking her hand when another car came into the yard. Donald's.

Donald and another man, a short monkey-like little creature in rough tan shirt and trousers came hurrying toward the house. As they came closer the stranger stared at Ben, and Ben stared back, and under his breath said, "That figures!"

Ben started down the flagstone path as quickly as the two were coming up. He only nodded at

them, but the little stranger grabbed his arm. He was a small man, but Gail could see that the wiry arm was very muscular.

"Just a minute . . ." he said.

Ben jerked free and started walking faster, but the man grabbed him again and swung him around. With his free arm Ben swung, knocked the smaller man loose. Again the man grabbed and again Ben swung, knocked him to the ground, and ran for his car.

Donald was immediately beside the little man, helping him to his feet.

"Get him!" the man cried. "Stop him!"

"Let him go!" Wolff commanded. "Cuff, come here. Come up to the office. Right now!"

He obeyed, but he still looked back over his shoulder, frowning, as he walked.

Gail and Donald stood watching as Ben started his car, swung around, and roared out of the gate.

Gail, "keeping her cool," asked in a quiet voice, "What was that all about?"

Donald shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea." He turned to attempt his usual smile but she could tell that he was tense—and dreadfully weary.

"How are you this morning?" he asked.

"Fine, thank you," she said as lightly as she could.

"I'm dying for a cup of coffee. Did Marylou show up?"

"No, she didn't. But I can make a fine cup of in-

stant. It's about time to make a second one for myself. Would you join me?"

He looked surprised. Of course, after the other night he might not expect any show of friendship. It wasn't exactly friendship. It was just something to do. Before Mother woke up. A way to keep busy until Ben came back.

"Why, thank you, Gail!"

He followed her into the kitchen, stood watching while she fixed the coffee.

"Cream? Sugar?"

"Both," Donald said. He did not move while she searched the icebox for the cream, and put it beside the bowl of sugar on the breakfast nook table.

"Here you are!" she announced.

"Let's take it in the living room. Kitchens depress me. Besides, Wolff might want me."

Gail was willing.

They sat in the untidy living room. The brandy snifters were still there. She thought of last night, of Ben. She hoped he was not in such a hurry as to be careless about his driving. He had left in such an angry rush. And who was the little man who had tried to stop him? Perhaps, if she were pleasant to Donald, he might tell her.

"Terrible storm." Her first try at normal conversation.

"Terrible," Donald echoed.

"They said on the radio that it was the worst in twenty-five years. The bridge up at the falls was

washed out. Lots of roads washed out. Some people were drowned."

Donald nodded. The news did not seem to interest him particularly. But the coffee apparently was helping. He could almost smile now, almost be the "nice young man" she first had met.

"Did you have trouble getting over here?"

He shrugged. "Not really. I had to drive awfully slowly."

"Do you live in Bellingburg?"

He half smiled. "Lord, no. I live in town."

"You commute in reverse."

"I guess you could call it that."

Keep calm, she told herself. Don't fire too many questions. But she kept thinking: if only I had guessed that something was going on, the other day when we went to town, I could have asked questions then and he might have let something drop. Was it too late, now?

"It must be interesting," She hoped she was speaking casually.

"What?"

"Your work."

"Oh."

"Well, you must admit you have unusual hours."

"I suppose so."

"Like last night."

He gave her a sharp look.

"What on earth was going on?" Wide-eyed innocence.

Donald drained his cup of coffee, lit a cigarette with a shaking hand, then began talking very rapidly.

"Last night was a very special order. From the Orient. A variety of . . . teas. There was a lot of red tape. Customs and so on. All very complicated. I'd hate even to try to explain it to an outsider."

"I see." What she saw was his nervousness, and what she felt was that he was not telling her the whole truth.

"Just one of those nights." Donald crossed and recrossed his long legs.

Gail sipped at her coffee. "I don't think I'd like working on weekends," she said lightly. "Nine to five, five days a week is more to my taste."

Suddenly, from upstairs, there was the sound of a door being flung open.

"Donald!" Wolff's loud voice. "Donald, get up here!"

Immediately Donald was on his feet. He walked out of the room without a word. His feet pounded up the stair.

The office door was slammed shut.

Gail got up, looked at her watch. Ben had only been gone a short time. How long would it take him?

What she must do now is speak to her mother. Surely, surely, Carolyn would be awake by this time. If she weren't, she must be wakened.

Gail tiptoed up the stairs, hesitated outside the office door for a moment.

Wolff was talking. "Cuff here says you didn't."

"I didn't do any of them," Donald's voice, very meek. "I didn't have time. They're right there, under the paper weight."

Gail hurried on up the stairs.

Her mother's bedroom door was closed now, so she tapped lightly.

"Yes?" Carolyn answered. "Come in, Marylou."

Gail opened the door. Her mother was up and dressed, sitting in front of her vanity, brushing her hair.

Gail closed the door behind her.

Carolyn turned her head. "Oh, it's you, dear."

"Sorry it's not breakfast, Mother. Marylou hasn't got here yet."

"Not yet? Oh, that woman!"

"It's not her fault, Mother. That was a bad storm last night. Roads were washed out, bridges, too, people drowned . . . Wolff didn't get here until a few minutes ago."

"He didn't? You mean you and I were all alone?"

"There was Ben, remember."

"Oh, yes."

"Don't you like him, Mother?"

"Of course I do!" Carolyn's eyes brightened. "You mean, he's a possible boy friend?"

"Possible."

"Good. You need boy friends. But, of course, aren't writers apt to be poor?"

Writers, maybe, but not necessarily public relations men. But of course Mother didn't know about that.

"Mother, quit jumping the gun," she said quietly.

"All right, all right, I'm sorry. Anyhow, if Marylou can't get here and if Wolff is back, you and I have things to do. Between us, I imagine we can fix up a respectable breakfast?" She got to her feet. There were lines under her eyes, she did not look as if she had slept well, but she was forcibly resuming her usual gentle smiling self, determined to carry on.

"Mother, before we go downstairs, I've got to tell you something."

Carolyn's smile faded.

Gail thought, I hate this, I hate telling her, but I've got to.

Chapter 11

"Mother, haven't you ever wondered about Wolff's strange office hours?"

"Now, Gail . . ."

"I know. You know nothing about his business; you stay clear of all of it. But haven't you, all the same, just *wondered?*"

"Perhaps. At first. But look, Gail, as I've told you and told you, that's the way Wolff wants it. He's an old-fashioned man, in some ways. I've accepted him, and his ways. I try my best not to be curious about his business. So should you."

"But I am curious. And so is Ben."

"Ben!"

"I said, I had something to tell you. It's a rather

long story and I don't want you to interrupt, please, until I'm all finished. You'd better sit down."

Wide-eyed, Carolyn obeyed, sinking down to the vanity chair. Gail perched on the foot of the bed.

"Ben has a teenage brother on drugs," she began.

"Oh, no! How dreadful. But what . . ."

"Mother—*please* don't interrupt!"

She told as briefly as she could of Ben's detective work, right up to the biscuit box labeled Sorenson's Imports. Then Carolyn did interrupt.

She was on her feet; her eyes were angry.

"That is absolute nonsense! And presumption —that Wolff could know anything about that! Those English biscuit boxes are very handy for storage. Marylou puts things away in them all the time."

"That's not all of the story, Mother."

"That young man is off on a wild goose chase. He had no right to come into our house, to accept our hospitality. Whatever he or you may think of Wolff, it's not true. Wolff has a temper and he can be crude sometimes, I'm afraid. But he's not deceitful, he's not. He's been good to me . . ." But even as she protested there was a touch of doubt in her eyes. "What's all this about an article for a magazine? Was that merely his excuse for coming?"

"Yes."

"Then he's the one who's been deceitful. I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense, and I want that young man out of my house."

"He's already gone, Mother."

"Good."

"To the police. He's quite sure we found evidence. In the office last night."

"You said *we*. You mean you were helping him?"

"Yes."

"Gail, how could you!"

"Because unlike you, I am curious. And, I am sorry to say, I simply don't trust Wolff."

Carolyn moved toward the door.

"I don't want to hear any more," she said over her shoulder. "I want to forget what you've said to me. We're going downstairs and fix breakfast."

"Mother . . ." Gail slipped off the bed. "Please pretend we didn't have this conversation. Please don't say anything to Wolff about . . . what we know."

"We know nothing!" her mother said sternly. "Nothing!"

They had just reached the first floor when Wolff suddenly came out of the living room.

"There you are, I was looking for you two."

From the expression on his face Gail was sure

he was going to ask about those missing papers, that he was very worked up. It was not going to be easy to keep her cool.

"What is it, dear?" Carolyn was looking up at her husband anxiously.

"Were you in the office while I was away?"

"No! No! Of course not."

Wolff turned to Gail. "What about you?"

"We know your rule about the office," Gail told him.

"Why, Wolff?" Carolyn asked. "What's the matter?"

"Something's missing. That's the matter."

"You mean you've been robbed?"

"Not money," Wolff said. "Some . . . important papers. A half a dozen or so papers, clipped together."

Carolyn looked at Gail, then back at her husband. "No!" she cried again, and burst into tears. "No, I haven't seen them."

Gail knew now that her mother believed her.

Carolyn turned and ran up the stairs.

Wolff moved closer to Gail, looked down at her.

"Now, young lady, what about you?"

She backed away from him, toward the living room.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're lying."

He grabbed both her arms, pushed her backward into the living room.

She tried to free herself but it was no use, he was much too strong. She cried, "Let go of me!"

"Look, kid, your daddy's going to get this out of you, or give you what for!"

"You're not my daddy." She thought of the photograph of those frightened children.

"I am the head of this house. Around here I'm the boss." He shook her again. "I want the truth. What do you know?"

"I know nothing, nothing!" she insisted.

He pushed her arms back, so viciously that she screamed. Then he threw her into one of the large chairs and slapped her face.

"Where's that Haynes fellow?"

Frightened, but angry, she lifted her chin defiantly.

"He's gone to the police."

She expected he would strike her again, but instead he crossed to the doorway and called up the stairs.

"Donald! Come here."

In a moment Donald had come down the stairs and into the living room. His nervousness had disappeared. He was actually smiling.

"Haynes has them," Wolff said quickly. Then he jerked a thumb at Gail. "Keep her here. I've work to do." He walked out of the room and closed the doors firmly.

Alone with Donald, Gail tried to sit up a little straighter, rubbing at the cheek that Wolff had slapped.

Donald came closer, still smiling.

"Wolff get a little rough?"

"Yes!" she snapped. "It's not a joke."

He shook his head. "Nobody but nobody should try to cross Wolff Sorenson."

"No?"

She must pull herself together. Everything would be all right. Ben would come, the police would come . . .

"Hey, you look real shook up," Donald said. "You better have a drink." He swung over to the bar. "Brandy okay? That's what's out."

"There's no ice."

If he went out to the kitchen she could run outside.

As if he had guessed what she was thinking, Donald said, "You don't need ice with brandy."

He brought her the drink, he offered her a cigarette, lit one himself and sat down opposite her.

"So you're wise," he said.

She did not answer.

Somehow he did not seem alarmed that Ben had the telltale papers, that Ben was probably headed for the police. How could he be so calm!

"Yes, I'm wise, as you put it."

"And you're shocked."

"Of course I'm shocked!"

"You're just naive. Drugs are no different from alcohol. It all depends on knowing how to handle them."

"That's not true."

"Look at me. Aren't I the All-American boy? I take a shot myself now and then. For kicks. To relax. After a night like last night. Like your mother takes those goof balls. What's the diff?"

Gail looked at him curiously. Perhaps this explained his change of mood. Earlier he had been distraught, downright nervous. She recalled other times when this had happened to Donald. The day he took her to lunch. He had hurried home, frantically, and soon afterward reappeared, all calm.

That was also like the evening he had kissed her so roughly. She must keep him talking, and not irritate him.

"So last night was a bad night. All that oriental tea."

He laughed. "I guess I'm not a very good liar. Well, the truth is, Wolff had got word of a possible leak. So we had to go about contacting people, late as it was, and bad as the weather was. Can be difficult, sometimes, but profitable. Highly profitable." He puffed on his cigarette, cocked his head at her. "I can see you still don't approve. But look, the kids want it, somebody's going to get it to them, anyhow."

Gail could only shake her head. This was staggering. He wasn't covering up!

"Look," Donald went on, "look at it this way. Wolff couldn't live in the style he does, nor could your mother, if he only handled foods. This whole silly business of imported foods for a cover is a bore and a half, and peanuts as far as income is concerned. You see, it was enough, back with the first Mrs. Sorenson because the first Mrs. Sorenson had dough. But when she was out of the picture, Wolff had to get smart."

"It still is a risky business," Gail insisted. "Some day he's sure to be caught." She couldn't help glancing at her watch.

Donald had pulled his chair closer, put out his cigarette.

"Don't worry." His tone was amused. "By the time your boy friend gets back with the cops Wolff will have taken care of everything. Not a speck of evidence. Haynes will find himself in a very embarrassing position."

Gail was furious at the other's calm. But she held her temper in check. Donald could be as cruel as Wolff. She must think, now, what could she do to help? If only she could go up to the office and see what Wolff was up to, even at the risk of his slapping her again.

She stood up. "Would a lady be permitted to . . . go to the bathroom?"

"She would not. Come on, Gail, this won't be for very long." He put himself between her and the door.

He came closer, put his arm across her shoulders. She was a little afraid to pull away. She was remembering night before last. And the door was closed. Champ would not be able to come to her rescue.

He led her back to the davenport, pulled her down beside him.

Even if Wolff destroys all evidence, she thought, I'll have a few things to tell the police when they get here—about the way he treated me. He's not going to get away with it. But why was Donald telling her so much? Was she to be silenced?

Donald kissed her on the cheek, very softly.

"Come on, honey, relax, easy does it."

It was galling, but there was nothing to do but sit here. Wait. Keep cool. Wait.

With his free arm he took her chin in his hands, turned her head so she was looking directly into his face.

Pleasant. Gentle. A completely different approach, different technique from the other evening.

Except for his eyes. His eyes were frightening.

"Donald . . ."

His grip grew firmer.

He'd had a shot this morning! The magic shot that took away his nervousness. As he had the other night. The pattern was falling into place. He

was hooked, however much he might deny it. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It was all clear now.

As she started to open her mouth to cry for help, his mouth was on top of hers and his heavy body had thrust her back onto the couch with himself across her. She struggled to free herself; he pushed her down again, more brutally. In desperation now she screamed and kicked, as they rolled to the floor.

At last, above her screams and sobs, she could hear the barking. Nita's familiar light tone, and Champ's enormous yelps.

The dogs, still barking, were scratching violently on the living room doors.

"Damn you, you bitch!" Donald had both her arms pinioned back on the floor, had thrown his full weight upon her.

The living room doors slid open and Nita and Champ roared into the room.

Donald let go of her and pulled back, and Gail rolled away from him, dragged herself across the floor. Nita was over her, licking her anxiously.

Champ headed straight for Donald who was half sitting up, lunged at him, threw him back, and leapt for his throat.

Chapter 12

Slowly Gail, holding onto a chair, pulled herself to her feet, clung to the chair and then the wall, and staggered to the doorway.

She leaned on the side of the doorway, vaguely aware that she was not alone. Then she turned her head and saw that it was her mother who had opened the doors.

"Champ!" Carolyn cried, but her soft voice could not carry the weight of a real command. "Oh, dear, oh good lord . . ." She moved out into the hallway and called in as loud a tone as she apparently could muster. "Wolff! Wolff! Your dog . . ."

Gail found she was trembling so that it was

difficult to try to pull her clothes in place, to smooth back her mane of yellow hair, to think with any sort of clarity.

Donald was crying out as he struggled.

Gail managed to get out into the hall, now leaned against the wall.

Upstairs the office door opened.

"What the devil's going on down there?" Wolff called out as he came down the stairs.

At the door to the living room he pushed both Carolyn and Gail aside and shouted to Champ.

Immediately the dog backed away from Donald. Champ was still growling, and the hair on his back was still raised, but he stood motionless.

Wolff pulled Donald to his feet, helped him to lie down on the davenport. Donald lay back, eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Wolff examined his face, his throat, turned back to the two women.

"Scratches mostly," he said. "He'll come around." He looked at Gail with curiosity.

"Your dog . . . rescued me," she managed to tell him.

"Hmmph. Women."

He gave one more look at Donald and then crossed the room and closed the sliding doors behind him.

"Should I get a doctor?" Carolyn asked.

"No. No. Just leave him alone for awhile."

He brushed past them, and up the stairs, Champ skulking behind him.

Carolyn turned her attention to her daughter. She stared at the torn clothes, the tangled hair, the red marks on Gail's face.

"Oh, you poor child! What happened?"

Gail took a deep breath. "Nothing . . . really happened. The dog came in time . . . with your help. I'd better go clean up."

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to, Mother."

"But I don't want to be alone down here!"

"I guess not."

Gail walked into the bedroom and immediately jerked off her torn clothes and tossed them in a corner. Carolyn fetched a wet wash cloth and mopped at her face.

"Oh, my dear, what did he do to you? Why?"

"He attacked me."

"I should not have run upstairs and left you down there; I ran away like a coward. But it was Wolff I left you with . . ."

"I know. He frightened me so that I blurted out that Ben had gone to the police. Then he set Donald guard over me."

Carolyn took the wash cloth back to the faucet, returned.

"This is cold. It should be colder. We'll get some ice . . ."

"It's okay, Mother." Gail went to the closet for fresh pants and blouse. "Thank goodness I brought plenty of clothes."

Carolyn stood watching, twisting the wash cloth nervously. "But why should Donald . . . be so brutal?"

Gail slipped into her pants, buttoned the blouse carefully, then reached for her hair brush. With her eyes on the mirror she said, "Your . . . nice young Donald is an addict."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. He told me he was."

"Gail, I'm so sorry!"

"It's not your fault. You didn't know."

"There's so much I didn't know. Or even guess." Carolyn shuddered.

Gail tied back her hair, dabbed on lipstick.

"I think what we need is coffee."

"Gail, what are we going to do?"

"Wait for Ben. And the police."

"Oh, Gail!"

Now that she was recovering, Gail was more angry than anything else.

"They're going to hear a word or two about one Donald Bishop." She was not quite ready to tell her mother, upset as the poor woman was, about the details of Wolff's treatment. "Whatever your Donald might call it, I call what he did assault and battery!"

Carolyn walked slowly to the bathroom,

dropped the wash cloth in the sink. When she came back Gail had finished tying her hair in place.

"Ready, Mother?"

Carolyn sighed. "I thought everything was going to be so wonderful. Everything."

Gail could think of nothing to say. She touched her mother's arm. It was hard to see her mother so unhappy. Carolyn was a vulnerable creature in many ways. She would pull out of this, of course. She would again find her dignity and her determination to keep that good old stiff upper lip. She would recover, on the surface, but underneath there would be a continued unhappiness, Gail felt sure.

"Come on, Mother," she said softly. "Coffee."

They were in the breakfast nook, drinking coffee in silence, when the silence was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, a door banging shut.

Gail went over and opened the back door.

Wolff and the man called Cuff, followed by Champ, were crossing the yard in the direction of Wolff's car.

"What is it?" her mother asked.

"They're leaving."

"They?"

"Wolff and that man who came this morning."

"What man?"

"Someone he called Cuff. I guess you were upstairs when he arrived.

"Cuff." Carolyn shook her head, puzzled.

If they think they're running away . . . Gail pondered. Why would Wolff run away, if, as Donald had said, he was destroying the evidence?

They finished their coffee. They heard the car driving away and the house was oddly silent.

Then the doorbell chimes started ringing.

They looked at each other.

"I didn't hear a car," Gail said.

"Neither did I."

Nita was barking.

"Let's see who it is," Gail said.

They went through the house to the front door. Carolyn hesitated before she opened it.

"Mrs. Sorenson?"

Gail recognized the voice even before she moved closer and saw the tall man with the suntanned balding head.

"Yes?" was Carolyn's answer.

"Name's Wilcott. John Wilcott. Neighbor of yours. Husband home? Any men about?"

He was still speaking in half sentences but much more rapidly than the last time Gail had seen him.

"Sorry, only my daughter and I are at home," Carolyn was saying. She must have forgotten about Donald. Just as well. He would not be much help to anyone, Gail thought.

Wilcott nodded. "How do, Miss Fisher. Looking for volunteers. Got a fire down the road. Your phone working?"

"No, it isn't," Gail told him. "I'm sorry."

Nita wriggled past Carolyn to regard Mr. Wilcott.

"Hi, fella." He patted her head.

"Her name's Nita," Gail explained.

"Hi, Nita." Then, apparently for the first time, his eyes were on Gail's bruised face. He looked from one to the other. "Anything wrong?"

From the first time they met Gail had liked John Wilcott. Her impulse now was to tell him, about everything. But before she could speak Carolyn said hastily, "Oh, no, no!"

Wilcott looked directly at Gail, as if he could read her expression.

But suddenly there was a growl from Nita, and they all three looked at her, watched her ears go up. She turned and raced up the stairs, barking wildly. A moment later she was running down again, still barking, then halfway up the flight of stairs, turning her head to look back toward them.

"Nita, what is it?" Gail asked.

"She's telling you something," John Wilcott said. "Something upstairs . . ."

The office, something about the office, Gail was sure. But somehow she did not want to go explore that place again. Wolff might have set some sort of trap.

"Better go see what it is," Wilcott said. "Dogs aren't dumb . . ."

Again their eyes met.

On impulse she asked, "Would you come with me, Mr. Wilcott?"

"Sure thing!"

Gail and Wilcott followed the dog up the stairs. Sure enough, she headed for the office, and, as before, put her nose to the bottom of the door at the back of the room.

But now there was more than a telltale odor. A fine line of smoke was oozing out from the hidden room.

Wilcott ran over to the door and tried to open it.

The evidence! Gail thought. That was how Wolff was destroying it.

Wilcott whirled around. "I'll get to town. Somehow. Another fire to report. 'Tain't much yet, but you two better be ready to clear out of the house."

Carolyn had followed them, was standing wide-eyed at the entrance to the office.

Wilcott strode toward her. "Excuse, ma'am, got to hurry!"

She backed away and he ran down the stairs.

"Gail, what shall we do?"

Gail thought a moment. "What about a hose, Mother? Isn't there a hose outside?"

"I suppose so. I don't know."

"Well, let's see!"

They hurried downstairs and out the back door, moving slowly around the house. Halfway they found it, old, half rotten, unattached, curled up by the faucet. Gail tried to attach it but both the faucet and the screw end of the hose were thoroughly rusted.

"Will it reach the second floor?" Carolyn wondered.

"I think so. If I can only get it attached."

Five minutes. Ten minutes. How long did Gail struggle? Then she looked up in despair and saw smoke coming out of the office window.

"Look, Mother! The fire's spreading! We'd better get our purses and anything else we want to rescue from the third floor. It seems to be spreading up, instead of down . . ."

Back into the house, with Nita still at their heels.

On their way to the third floor Gail tried to reassure her mother. "It's not a real fire yet. It may not spread much farther." The assurance she did not feel. A fire was a fire, and they had no telephone—and Wilcott might have difficulties getting to town.

They each hurried into their separate rooms. Gail picked up only her purse. The safety of the rest of her things would be a gamble, but she'd have to take it.

She ran to her mother's room. Carolyn, clutching her purse, and her jewel box, was in tears, looking about her cluttered room.

"Come on, Mother, hurry! You can't take everything!"

It could only be a small fire. Wolff would have been careful about that.

Nita, who had been sticking close to them, ran ahead of them out into the hall and again began her wild barking.

"What now, Nita?" Gail asked, but when she got to the head of the stairs she saw. In the few minutes they had been on the third floor the fire had spread, out of the office and across the hall. There was fire on the stairs, as well.

Still Gail started down.

"Maybe we can get through," she told her mother.

"Gail, Donald's down there."

"That's right."

They were close to the second floor now.

"Donald! Donald!" Carolyn called out.

There was no answer.

Nita turned back up the stairs, whimpering.

"We can't get through, Gail. We can't."

"The back stairs!" Gail cried.

"Of course."

They turned and ran back to the third floor. Carolyn again looked into her room, then followed Gail down the hall to the rear of the house.

"Thank God I remembered these stairs," Gail said.

"I forgot because I never have used them," Carolyn sighed. "They're so steep."

The stairs were also very dark; they had to feel their way, clinging to the banister. They found out the cause of the darkness when they reached the first floor. The door to the kitchen at the bottom of the stairs was locked.

"Again, I forgot," Carolyn cried. "Marylou . . . she always kept it locked. Wolff told her to keep it locked."

Nita, crying now, was scratching against the door in vain.

They could not get out; there was nothing to do but go back upstairs. Smoke had already been billowing from the locked door on the second floor landing, now the hall was full of smoke.

"Keep going, Mother!" Gail cried. "We've got to keep going, as high as we can, maybe we can get out on the roof."

As they climbed they heard a car honking, loudly and persistently.

The third floor hall was also full of smoke. They choked their way through to Carolyn's room, which was the nearest, closed the door behind them. Gail ran to the window.

Ben's car was at the gate. But Wolff had locked the gate behind him.

"It's Ben, Mother! But he can't get in. The buzzer is in the office, isn't it?"

Carolyn nodded.

Gail threw the window open wide and called out, "Ben! Ben! We're up here!" wondering if the fire were visible from where his car was standing.

Ben had come at last. But he was alone. Where were the police? And how on earth could he help them when he couldn't even get through the gate?

He had stopped honking. What would he do next? She saw now that he was moving the car, turning and backing until it was parallel to the fence. He killed the engine, got out of the car, and then she realized what he was going to do—climb over the fence.

It was a high fence and the gate was controlled by that electrical mechanism. For all she knew the whole fence might be electrified. Oh, Ben, be careful! she wanted to cry out, but he was too far away to hear her.

He climbed on the side of the low sports car, precariously balanced, put his hands on top of the fence to lift himself up. Twice he raised himself only to just hang there, finally dropping inside the car. The third time he finally hoisted himself up, straddled the fence, sat a moment or too catching his breath, then turned, again clutched the fence, and let himself drop to the muddy lawn.

Carolyn was beside her at the window now and so was Nita, her paws on the sill, her tail wagging

for the first time since the fire had been discovered.

When Ben came closer Gail called out to him. He stopped and looked up, his face surprised and angry.

"Wilcott said you were clearing out!"

"We got caught!"

He shook his head, mumbled something about the fire department.

The fire seemed closer to her now, it was hard to hear him above the sound of the flames.

The back stairs was still their only hope.

She could only call out a word or two at a time. *Back stairs. Locked door. Back door.* Finally he seemed to understand. At least he nodded, moved closer, then disappeared from sight.

"Come on, Mother, we've got to try it again."

By now the hall was so full of smoke it was difficult just to find their way to the back stairs. Coughing, choking, clinging to her mother's hand and pulling her after, Gail made it across.

As they reached the first floor Carolyn suddenly slumped down on the floor. Gail sat down on the bottom step and bent and put her arms around her mother.

Somewhere in the house there was the noise of timber crashing.

Nothing to do but wait. And pray.

Chapter 13

Later she was to learn that they were only there on the back stairs for a few moments, but at the time it seemed an agonizing eternity. What irony —all that rain, those torrents of water during last night's storm—that should have stopped! Her eyes were stinging from the smoke, she was using all her strength just to breath. Nita's panting was as loud as the fire itself. Finally, at last, a new sound, the key turning in the door, the opening. And Ben. He picked up her mother and carried her out, Nita rushing past him and Gail stumbling after.

The fire had not reached the kitchen, but they did not linger there, went out the back door into the sunny morning.

Ben carried her mother across the yard, down near the gate, far from the house, and lay her down on the grass.

Gail wiped her hands on the wet grass and rubbed the water on her mother's face. Gradually her mother stirred, moaned, opened her eyes, looked around bewilderedly.

"It's all right, Mother. You're safe."

Ben was bending over the two of them.

Gail looked up at him.

"Thank God you got here!"

"Thank God," he repeated. "The fire department should be here any moment. Is there anyone left in the house? Where's Wolff?"

"He's gone. But oh, Ben, Donald is in there, in the living room. He . . ."

But there wasn't time to explain about Donald. The important thing was to get him out. Gail got to her feet.

"The fire's all upstairs, isn't it?"

"That's the main part." Ben nodded. "But it's spreading. The living room? I might be able to get there."

"I'll go with you!" Gail cried. "If he's still unconscious you'll need help."

"Gail, don't!" her mother protested.

"Donald Bishop may be a rat but he's a human being!"

Ben started toward the house and Gail ran after

him. Nita did not follow. Whimpering, she cuddled down beside Carolyn.

"I left the front door open," Ben explained. "I tried to get up to you that way first but the stairs were shot, also the dining room, so I couldn't get into the kitchen, that way." He stopped at the steps and looked at her, studied her face. "Gail, you shouldn't try to go back in there. What did you mean, if he were still unconscious . . . was he overcome by the smoke?"

"I don't know. It all happened earlier, before we discovered the fire. Champ attacked him."

They had reached the front door. Ben was still looking at her, as if now he understood or guessed what had happened.

"You called him a rat."

"Never mind."

The front hall was filled with smoke, and the living room door was ajar and smoke was pouring in there, but the fire had not yet reached the front of the house.

Donald still was lying on the davenport, his eyes closed.

Ben shook him first, but he only groaned.

The blood had dried on the gashes on his neck and arms, but he was deadly pale, beaten, limp . . .

Ben grabbed hold of Donald's shoulders and Gail his ankles, and they dragged him through the

room and the smoke-filled hall, gasping for breath, down the steps and across the yard to where Carolyn was now sitting up.

Donald was breathing, deeply, and irregularly. He was still alive!

Abruptly aware of her weariness, Gail sat down next to her mother. Ben sat down, too, leaning his back against the fence. They all looked up at the house. The flames were curling around from the back to the front, like great red hungry hands.

"I feel so helpless!" Gail sighed. "If only we could do something to put it out."

"All my lovely things . . ." Carolyn was quietly weeping.

"How did it start?" Ben asked.

Gail gave him a steady look. "In that locked room, off the office. I think . . ."

Ben leaned closer. "Yes?"

"Something Donald said. About Wolff destroying the evidence. I don't think he intended to set fire to the whole house."

"Oh, no, I'm sure he wouldn't do that," Carolyn murmured.

"Ben, you did go to the police?" Gail asked.

"Oh, yes, yes. First, tell me what happened here after I left."

Gail glanced at her mother, but Carolyn had turned her head.

"Wolff discovered you'd taken those papers. He grilled Mother and me, wanting to know if we had

been in the office. We both denied it. Then Mother went up to her room . . ."

"I was a coward," Carolyn interrupted. "I should have stayed with you. But it was all such a shock. I was beside myself."

"Of course you were!" Gail hastened to reassure her.

"Then what happened?" Ben asked quickly.

Gail looked down. "I'm afraid when Wolff got rough with me, I panicked. I told him you'd gone for the police."

Carolyn closed her eyes momentarily, as if she were in pain.

"Well," Gail went on, "Wolff put Donald guard over me, there in the living room. Donald was almost pleasant, at first. He fetched me a brandy, he sympathized with me. Before, he'd made up a story about what was going on last night. But when he knew that I knew about Wolff's sideline, he spoke quite frankly. And he defended dope, admitted he was on it. But then he . . . he went after me, and I yelled, and the dogs heard, and it was Mother who opened the living room doors. Champ attacked him. It was horrible."

She looked over at Donald. He had opened his eyes but they were dazed. His face was expressionless, it even held an odd sort of innocence, almost now like the pleasant football-player type she first had met—a rather battered one. It was almost difficult to remember the stranger he had become

back there in the living room only a short while ago.

Carolyn said softly, "He seemed such a nice young man. Always polite."

"It's the drugs, Mother. He *is* a nice young man when he's off the stuff." She kept her voice almost as low as her mother's, so that Donald could not hear.

Gail saw Ben look at his watch. He was frowning.

"Ben, what about the police? Where are they?"

"What about Wolff?" Ben countered. "And his man Cuff? Cuff may be a key piece. I hope to heaven they haven't run too far."

"But you did alert the police?"

"I tried to, but I had a little trouble there. The sergeant on duty at the Bellingburg police station was not exactly impressed. He said he couldn't act on such a matter, that he'd have to locate his superior, Police Chief Finnegan, not easy on a Sunday morning. I could have shaken him, the dumb cluck. So lackadaisical! So nonchalant! So just plain bored with my story. His reaction was that if this business had been going on for months, years, what was the rush? He actually shrugged when he told me, 'I guess mebbe we got a few hours to close it up proper.' "

"How annoying! But . . . how come you didn't wait for them?"

Ben's smile was gentle. "In that town the fire

station is right next to the police station. I met Wilcott. He told me about you. I had to come back!"

He patted her hand.

"Even though you thought Wolff would be here?"

"All the more reason for coming back. I was worried about leaving you here. You knew that." Across the valley they could hear it now. The siren of the fire engine from the Bellingburg station.

Chapter 14

The gate! That damned locked gate. Would the firemen have to climb over the fence, as Ben had? But they would have to get the equipment close to the house . . .

There was a way to open it at the gate itself. Donald had done that. Gail looked at Donald who now seemed more awake, although still dazed.

"Donald, can you open the gate?"

Slowly he brought his eyes to focus on her.

"Gate," he repeated.

"Donald, the fire department's got to get in!"

Ben shook Donald's shoulder. "Come on, fella, come to!"

Donald was trembling. "The gate opens from the outside. Gotta be outside."

"Then come on, Buddy, climb that fence! You're big enough."

Donald just looked at him. "Sorry," he said quietly. "Very sorry."

The roar of the engine was getting closer. Then they realized that not only the fire engine was approaching, but another car, driving in front of the engine.

Gail recognized it. Wolff's.

So he had not run away.

Wolff got out of his car and hurried to open the gate, then ran and drove his car a bit down the road, out of the way, so the fire engine could swing through.

As the firemen went into action, one of them, obviously the chief, stood aside, directing.

Everyone's eyes were on the house.

Wolff left his car outside and came inside the yard. Beside him was the little man called Cuff. They were so intent upon the fire that at first they did not seem aware of the little group by the wall, blocked off by the fire engine.

The fire chief turned to Wolff.

"What's all this about a small fire? Christ almighty, man, this is a three-alarm baby. By now we'll never be able to lick it."

"I assure you, when I left here it was a very

small fire. My phone was dead, so I drove to town as quickly as I could."

Ben and Gail looked at each other. Of course he had gone to report it. No one was going to accuse him of arson!

Ben turned to Carolyn. "Just keep as calm as you can, Mrs. Sorenson. There'll be questions, by the fire department, and the police when they get here."

"The police?" Donald suddenly seemed more awake than he had been since Champ's attack. He pulled himself slowly to his feet.

"The police," Ben repeated. "They will be coming."

There was only a flicker of fear on Bishop's face. Then he smiled. He was almost his usual poised self. "But there is no evidence. No evidence at all!" He waved in the direction of the house.

Wolff was coming toward them.

Carolyn moved closer to Gail, held her arm.

Wolff looked down at his wife.

"My dear, are you all right?"

"I'm quite all right. Thanks to Gail. And this young man." She smiled at Ben.

"For *that* I thank them," Wolff said shortly. "Carolyn, you look dreadfully weary. Why don't you go sit in the car?"

"I told you, I'm all right."

"Everything will be cleared up shortly," Wolff

said. "The house is ruined, but I think the fire's almost over. Thank God for insurance!"

Suddenly Carolyn spoke. "But . . . would the insurance cover if you . . ."

Wolff glared at his wife.

"If what?" the fire chief asked.

Carolyn knew that Wolff had started the fire. Even if he had not intended to burn down the house, he had started the fire!

"Carolyn, be quiet," Wolff snapped. "There are many things you do not understand, that you should not concern yourself with!"

A sudden enormous crash made everyone turn toward the fire. The roof of the house was falling in. The flames were hissing now under the onslaught of the hoses. Gradually the noise of the fire was diminishing.

Donald moved to Wolff's side, whispered something in his ear.

Wolff did not change expression. "I know," he said aloud. "And I know who is responsible." He looked at Ben. "I think you've meddled enough in my affairs. It's time you left."

"Not yet." Ben's answer was amazingly calm.

"Donald!" Wolff called. "Try to persuade this gentleman to do as I ask . . ."

Donald had taken only a few steps toward Ben when out of the bushes came Champ—and Nita—both growling.

Donald backed away against the fence. "Stop them! Stop them!"

Wolff grabbed Champ's collar.

A new sound filled the air. The shriek of another siren that made both dogs prick up their ears and begin to howl. The police had arrived.

The whole group moved closer to the gate. Donald was still trembling, moving as far from the dogs as possible but Wolff, still clutching Champ's collar, although pale, was maintaining a calm.

"Wolff Sorenson?" the policeman asked.

"Yes."

"I am Chief Finnegan. I have . . . some questions."

"I hope I can answer them."

The chief was holding out the bundle of papers that Ben had given to the officer in the station.

"Now these," Wolff said, "I can explain. In my business . . ."

He had destroyed the evidence. Donald had assured her that Wolff was equal to the situation, and the way he was behaving sent a shiver up Gail's spine. He was so sure of himself! Bone tired as he must be he was still being authoritative, despite the indignity of holding his dog's collar.

"Donald," he interrupted himself to say, "would you get Champ's chain from my car so I can tie up this dog? And then drive the ladies into town. It's been an excruciating day for them."

As Donald started toward the gate the police chief said, "Just a minute . . ."

Wolff interrupted Finnegan with a "with your permission" gesture of his hand and continued, to Donald:

"You've had a hard day, too. Cuff will drive you all in. Be careful, Cuff. The roads are horrible. We don't want any accident."

He tossed his keys to the little man he'd called Cuff, who, with Donald, started toward the gate.

Wolff turned back to the chief. "Excuse me, but my wife and her daughter have been through a horrifying fire—smoke inhalation as well as terror."

Gail knew a recurrence of the terror she'd known—was it only this morning—when she was locked with Donald. Was she reading too much into Wolff's look toward Donald and Cuff as he spoke of "accident"?

"I'll get the chain," she blurted, and started toward the gate.

The dryness in the police chief's voice was replaced with acerbity as he motioned to one of his men and spoke to Wolff.

"Mr. Sorenson, I must inform you that the premises . . ."

But Gail did not hear the rest. Donald, she'd noticed, had stopped, but Cuff was slinking out. A "key piece" Ben had called him. Wolff wanted to

get them all away. Then there would be only Ben's word against his.

She ran after him, Nita following, across the yard, past the fire engine, out of the open gate.

He was headed for Wolff's car.

She remembered the strength he had showed with Ben. Still, she must try to stop him!

She caught up with him when his hand was on the car door.

"Wait a minute!" Gail cried.

"What the devil . . ." He turned and glared at her.

"You're not going anywhere," she told him. "Not yet!"

"The hell I'm not."

She grabbed his arm, he pushed her away and she grabbed again. Then, with his free arm he swung. His fist crashed against her jaw, and she fell backward into the gully beside the road.

She shook herself, rubbing her jaw. Above her she saw a flashing bundle of whirring white fury blurred with the man's legs.

Now he was down with little Nita dashing in and out, trying to close in at his head. Then he was up and climbing into Wolff's car, aiming kicks which missed. Nita was everywhere and nowhere.

Gail had to cling to roots to drag herself muddily up from the gully.

The car had started. She had just time to open

the door opposite the driver's seat and lurch in and jerk on the hand brake.

The car stopped; the engine died, just in front of the open gate.

Cuff struck her again.

"Cut that out!" Ben was running out of the yard. Before Cuff could start the car again Ben had moved in and grabbed him. Gail pushed at Cuff's back and in a moment Ben had dragged the little man from the car.

It took two officers to get Cuff into the yard and over to where the chief was questioning Wolff.

"Who's this?" the chief wanted to know.

"An employee of mine," Wolff told him.

"An accomplice," Ben added. "As is Mr. Bishop."

"Cuff has been one of my many employees," Wolff said. "A near mental case whom I have kept on out of pity. He's inefficient, and an inveterate liar."

Cuff looked at Wolff, his face all surprise and confusion.

Ben said, "It was this man who told me about the coding for packages to come here. Never into retail outlets . . ."

Ben moved closer, put his hand on Cuff's shoulder.

"Tell them, old buddy, what you told me. About the code on all that comes to the warehouse. And what you know of the ones that got

away. Like the one that got to my brother. It had the code!"

"Here's your criminal!" Wolff shouted. "If there's been any drug smuggling, here is your culprit, an ignorant liar!"

Sudden fire came into Cuff's eyes. Wolff, in his frightened anger, had gone too far.

"I was only takin' my fair cut!" Cuff cried. Then he straightened and looked directly at Wolff, as if he were terribly relieved to be speaking the truth at last. "But only a few. Not like he did. Not like that big bastard did!"

"Why, you . . ."

Wolff leapt across the space between them, his hands encircled Cuff's skinny neck.

And then the police moved in.

They sat in a booth at Ye Village Inn, drinks on the table in front of them. Upstairs, in the hostelry part of the Inn, Carolyn, under sedation, was fast asleep.

"This has been the strangest long weekend of my life," Gail said.

"The strangest two days of mine," Ben added.

"And the longest day." Gail sighed. "I was certainly ready for this drink. I just don't know how we did it!"

"Did what?"

"Lived through the day." Gail sighed wearily.

"I thought you meant the exposure of one Wolff Sorenson. We did that—together."

"You did it," Gail insisted. "I only helped."

"You stopped Cuff. That took guts."

"Well, you'd said he was a key piece. And Donald had told me that last night there had been a leak. And the way you looked at him when we first arrived. What surprised me was how, at the last, he changed."

"I don't think he really changed. It was just that in the big pinch his hatred for Wolff was bigger than any other emotion he might have felt."

"What is his real name? I didn't catch it at police headquarters."

"Something long and unpronounceable. I think they'll be a little easier on him, after his giving evidence. He must have suspected from my questioning at the warehouse that Sorenson's name had gotten connected with the traffic and wanted to point the finger up here and away from him. His guilt was bigger than he was, then, and again, today. Not the brightest chap in the world but my friend, my buddy, Cuff. Let's drink to him."

Gail lifted her glass but she gave a little shiver. Aloud she wondered, "What was Chief Finnegan barking at Wolff when I bolted out the gate. Something about 'inform you' . . . ?"

"That really deflated Sorenson." Ben shook his head. "The chief told him his warehouse in New York was now under police surveillance. Wolff

started to bluster about illegal entry and Finnegan, going back to the dry easy way of speaking up here (it was like listening to Wilcott) told him entry would properly proceed in his presence and that they would provide him suitable escort back to his warehouse. And then Finnegan turned to deflate me."

"How?" Gail gasped. "What had you done wrong?"

" 'Mr. Haynes,' he said, 'after your visit we were in touch with Narcotics Control by radio relay to an open phone line. Up here we've learned not to depend entirely on the local phone.' He went on to tell me the New York police were upset that I hadn't given them the information—however speculative—that I gave him."

"But, Ben, you didn't really know anything, until you got here. How could . . ."

"That's what I started to tell but he cut in with 'We know what you wanted to do when you came here, but in the future, Mr. Haynes, try to remember that that is what the police are for!' "

Ben again lifted his glass. "Let's drink to Chief Finnegan. And to Mr. Wilcott, while we're at it. He's our friend, too."

Again they drank. Then Ben reached across the table and put his hand over hers.

"It's all over, Gail."

It was hard to realize that it was over. That

there was no more house, no more Sorenson's Imports, that her mother would move back into that small apartment and that life would go on as before.

"We're quite a team, aren't we?" Ben said softly.

"We certainly have been," she agreed.

After a moment he said, "Why don't we keep it up? After all, we both live on 55th Street . . ."

"East Side, West Side," she half sang it in a shaky voice.

"All around the town," he finished for her.

They laughed together, loud with embarrassment and abrupt shyness, and went on laughing, until Nita came out from under the table, put her paws in Ben's lap, and wagged her tail in agreement.

Deadly Questions

Her mother's new home, a three-story shambles dominating a hill near the edge of the village, wasn't at all what Gail had expected. At autumn dusk, with its windows lighted, it looked like an evilly leering jack-o'-lantern.

From the moment of her arrival, Gail felt apprehensive. Not only was there something sinister about the house itself, but Wolff Sorenson was anything but the jovial importer of fine foods he pretended to be. Why did he so carefully guard his office? Who were the strangers who called on him at odd hours of the night? Was handsome Donald Bishop quite what he seemed—and what was the *real* reason Ben Haynes wanted to talk to Wolff?

Gradually the answers came clear. But with them came the dreadful certainty that no one could know what Gail had learned—and continue to live!

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